

RYOU YUUKI

ART CHISATO NARUSE

3

EATING
MAGICAL POWER
MADE ME THE
STRONGEST!

MAGIC
STONE
Gourmet



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Prologue

Cheers flooded the streets of Ishtarica in celebration of Crown Prince Ein's heroic actions. The boy had slain a Sea Dragon—a horrifying monster so destructive that only the Demon Lord had surpassed its power. The brave legion of warriors sent ahead of the prince had managed to successfully bag their own dragon as well. After saving Commander Christina Wernstein from an almost-guaranteed death, Ein and his comrades had made their triumphant return to the royal capital.

A few days after Ein's return, Queen Lalalua found herself locked in conversation with a trio of her peers: the former marshal Lloyd Gracier, Chancellor Warren Lark, and her husband Silverd—Ishtarica's king.

"After all that's happened, it's still quite a pity that we've neglected to provide Ein with a reward," she said. "However, you can't reward him directly due to your position, correct?"

Ein's bravery rivaled even that of the first king. However, the boy had ignored his obligations as Ishtarica's crown prince in the process. Even if the prince had disregarded the king's direct orders, Lalalua however, wasn't amicable to the idea of Ein being left unrewarded.

"I-Indeed..." Silverd replied. "But as you are part of the royal family, I cannot allow you to reward him either."

"If I may, Your Majesty," Lloyd interjected. "I can see where Her Majesty is coming from. While our heroic Sir Ein certainly did act on his own, he returned with excellent results to show for it."

"Indeed. It's as Sir Lloyd says. Ignoring this matter has the potential to earn you the people's ire," Warren added.

"I understand that," Silverd replied. "But even so..."

"Dear," Lalalua said. "What vessel was Ein riding upon when he made his grand return?"

"He was on the *Princess Olivia*, of course."

"Why is that?"

"Why are you asking? It was the best boat available. My ship couldn't be used and *Princess Olivia* was already docked in Magna's port."

A confused Silverd narrowed his eyes and stared at his wife.

"Oh dear, it seems that still you're slow to understand me, my love," Lalalua sighed. She always treated her husband with the utmost

respect, but with only a few trusted confidants around, Lalalua wasn't afraid to let a few snide remarks slip through. "You're always like this when it comes to your family. Warren, you understand what I'm implying, don't you?"

"Of course," the chancellor replied. "You're referring to Sir Ein's lack of a ship to call his own."

"That's right. Isn't this the perfect opportunity?"

It was well within the nation's power to provide a boat to their prince. There was sound reasoning behind the queen's proposal, even if the vessel was treated as a reward. Given the fact that Ein could very well face another crisis, access to a ship of his own would be vital.

"He's a hero! The boy saved countless lives," Lalalua continued. "It's only natural for his country to provide him with a reward. Is that not so?"

"H-Hmmm... You have a point," Silverd relented. "I shall notify him immediately—"

"Dear, can you leave that to me?"

"If you can tell what you're planning first. None of this is good for my heart."

"Well, don't we have a magnificent *pair* of monsters at our disposal?"

Warren's eyes widened. "Queen Lalalua, you don't mean..."

"Let's use one of those Sea Dragons to build a ship. A masterpiece that will serve as a new symbol of Ishtarica's might... One that shall exceed the *White King's* capabilities."

"I...didn't expect you to say that," Silverd replied.

"We have two of them, so it shouldn't be much of a hassle to spare one for Ein's boat. He single-handedly defeated one of them anyway," Lalalua said. "As for your decision, I have no complaints to voice...though we are dealing with a pair of entirely separate matters."

The women of Ishtarica's royal family had always been strong-minded, making them forces to be reckoned with. Queen Lalalua was no different.

"Since we'll be building a new warship, why don't we give it a name?" the queen suggested.

She dubbed the ship the Sea Dragon Vessel *Leviathan*.

"It'll be a ship worthy of a hero, Your Majesty," Warren said.

"Indeed," Silverd agreed. "I'm starting to think that this isn't a bad idea after all."

Meanwhile, the royal capital's port was currently home to something other than its regular spread of seafood—the remains of the

slain Sea Dragons.

“Sir Graff, we’ve finished taking apart the head!”

“Very good,” Graff replied. “Now, we shall...”

Graff Agustos had long discarded his household name of August, opting to live in Ishtarica under a new name. He’d first set foot in the port for work. Known as Heim’s “Champion of Trade,” Graff was essentially in charge of the kingdom’s terrestrial trade. Thanks to his in-demand skill set as well as direct funding from the royal family, the former “champion” had been able to establish the Agustos Trading Firm. This up-and-coming firm had now been brought in to assist with the Sea Dragons. Graff had decided to bring his longtime butler and servants along to help him at the worksite.

While supervising the area, Graff could hear his skilled craftsmen gushing over Ein’s heroic deeds.

“That sure is one empty boulder of a magic stone! Taking on this big ol’ snake on his own... That crown prince is quite the kid!”

“No doubt! Ishtarica’s future is looking bright! All right, next!”

Suddenly, one of Graff’s craftsmen called out to him.

“Sir Graff! Sir Graff!”

“Hm? Is there a problem?” Graff asked.

“There’s something I’d like you to take a look at. Could you please follow me?”

“Very well. Butler, I leave this area to you.”

“Your wish is my command,” the butler replied.

With that, Graff followed the craftsman to the pier. He soon found himself standing next to a Sea Dragon in the middle of being dissected, its innards spread out for all to see.

“I’m sorry for suddenly calling for you, Chairman,” the craftsman apologized.

“I don’t mind. What’s the issue?” Graff replied.

“Over there...” The craftsman pointed to an area on top of the pier where a pair of large, pale-blue spheres were wriggling about. “We collected these from the dragon’s stomach and...they’re moving.”

For a split second, Graff’s face was as pale as one of the balls. “Are these eggs?”

“That’s what we believe, but we don’t know for sure. That’s why I brought you over.”

Graff turned silent for a moment. “I don’t know either.”

Was he allowed to destroy these spheres of his own accord? If these happened to be priceless resources, then he wouldn’t have the authority to do so. After much agonizing, Graff ordered his butler to send one of his employees to the castle.

A short while later, a large party arrived—far more people than

Graff had anticipated.

“Sir Graff, I’ve been brought here by the news,” the former marshal said. “Is it true that you may have found eggs?”

“Sir Lloyd,” Graff replied. “To tell you the truth, I cannot be certain of that. I’d like to have another pair of eyes take a look.”

Upon the party’s arrival, Lloyd had been the first to dismount from his horse, with Ein and Chris right behind him. While Lloyd was only the king’s personal knight these days, the gravity of the situation had required him to scope out the situation himself. His intimidating armor and powerful aura made it clear to most everyone that Lloyd had served as Ishtarica’s marshal for many years.

“So, these must be the eggs you were talking about,” Lloyd muttered.

Though the wriggling balls didn’t seem dangerous at a glance, they were most likely Sea Dragon eggs. Lloyd stood at the front of the party while all the knights behind him unsheathed their blades. The vigilant knights were caught off guard when the eggs suddenly started to crack.

“Sir Lloyd!” Chris shouted. “Are they hatching?”

“Yes, that’s what it looks like!” Lloyd exclaimed. “We must keep them away from Sir Ein at all costs!”

“Of course! Would you please step back, Sir Ein?”

“I know...” Ein replied. “I won’t do something brash.”

The boy had been visiting with his mother, but when Chris delivered the news, he’d begged to be brought along. The eggs started to crack even more until...

“Scree! Scree!” the pair of baby dragons cried, poking their heads from out of the shells.

Their pale-blue bodies strongly suggested that these little ones were Sea Dragons. The meter-long babies adorably tried to shake themselves around to get a feeling for their bodies. The sight of their thick torsos, tails, and long necks reminded Ein of tiny versions of the mythical Loch Ness Monster from his previous world.

“Wait, Chris,” Ein said. “Are you going to kill those two babies?”

“Of course,” the new marshal replied. “Do you think we should let them live?”

While the two were conversing, Lloyd had drawn his sword and approached the twin Sea Dragons. Huddled together, the trembling babies tried to spook Lloyd with their shrill cries. However, the pair ended up shrinking back in place.

“I mean, they don’t have their parents anymore...” Ein murmured. “In fact, I absorbed one of their parents’ magic stones... It leaves a bad taste in my mouth.”

“U-Um, Sir Ein?” Chris said quizzically. “What are you up to?”

“I’ll explain later,” the crown prince said, before turning to the king’s personal knight. “Lloyd, could you wait a moment?”

Lloyd stopped in his tracks, but he didn’t turn around. “Whatever is the matter?”

“You’re going to kill those twins because they’re dangerous, right?”

“Indeed. This is to safeguard Ishtarica from future disaster.”

“This might not be a normal thing for the royal capital, but other cities have service dragons.”

Service monsters were a common sight in many of the nation’s cities. Often trained from a young age, these bestial companions were extremely loyal and obedient to their masters.

“Chris, could you follow me?” Ein asked.

Unable to stop the crown prince, the new marshal did as she was told. Upon seeing Ein approach them, the pair of baby dragons cried loudly before they wriggled up to him.

“Yeah, I knew it,” Ein said as he looked at the adorable babies. “I don’t think they’ve imprinted on me, but I think I’m sort of a parent to these little guys.”

Though it was just a hunch on the prince’s part, the twins must have sensed the Sea Dragon’s essence within him. The Elder Lich was able to sense the Dullahan in him, so it wouldn’t be out of the question for the Sea Dragons to do the same.

“Lloyd, would it be easy to kill these two?” Ein asked.

“I can do so in one breath,” Lloyd replied.

“What about Chris? And could Dill kill them too?”

“I believe it wouldn’t be an issue. Judging from the babies’ squiggling, even the castle’s knights would have no trouble dispatching them.”

Upon hearing Lloyd’s thoughts, Ein had a few of his own.

“Then could we look after them? Just for one day?” the crown prince asked.

“I don’t think that would be a problem, but just what are you thinking?” Lloyd asked.

Seeing Lloyd relent, Ein gave a triumphant smile. “Only one plan of action comes to mind when a child finds a stray animal... I’m gonna beg to keep them, of course.”

With a smirk on his face, Ein started to imagine how his grandfather would react when he got back to the castle.

“Well, with things like this, I should ask my dad first...” Ein said. “Which I guess is my grandfather in this case.”

Lloyd was frozen in place with his jaw agape while Chris buried her head in her hands. Once they found the right opening, the baby dragons wriggled right up next to Ein. It was a scene so wholesome

that the knights couldn't help but give in to the prince's request.



It didn't take long for Silverd to give his approval either.

Chapter One: Life Returns to Normal as a Shadow Looms

A month had passed since Ein's tussle with the Sea Dragons, and in another month, he'd be setting sail for Euro. The injuries he'd incurred in battle were healing smoothly, enough for him to start swinging a blade again. After being unable to move his arms for weeks, Ein would soon have full use of them once again.

As part of his daily routine, Ein did some light exercise after waking up in the morning. After breaking a sweat, he'd head down to Katima's research facility.

He gazed at the lower level's stone walls and flooring before saying, "I'm never gonna get used to this. It's so different from the rest of the castle."

Ein opened the door to be greeted by an office crammed full of magical tools. It wasn't a small office by any means, but the cornucopia of knickknacks hanging around made it clear that Katima was quite the researcher. Her status as first princess aside, Katima's work was well regarded among her peers.

"There mew are, you crazy prince," the Cait-Sith said as she wiggled her whiskers.

"Must always you greet me with an insult?" Ein asked.

"Of course not. Come have a seat."

As usual, Ein obediently followed along and sat on the sofa.

"Take a look," Katima said, placing a fairly fresh stack of papers down on the table. "Chris used a little of her fur-ee time and translated that ancient Elven into modern text."

Ein took the documents and started to flip through them. "Wait, the jet-black blade in this illustration is..."

"Didn't Chris already explain it to mew? The Elder Lich used her core's power to create a blade furr her mate. Looks familiar, doesn't it?"

"Of course. It was my partner, after all."

Lost in his battle with Sea Dragon, Ein's shortsword partner was identical to the blade depicted in the documents.

"According to these texts, the blade is referred to as 'The Iron Shard of the Fallen.' It was made with the Elder Lich's unique brand of magic, in which she slowly shaved off scraps from her core in order to forge a blade, mew see."

“Just hearing how it was made terrifies me.”

“But hey... I think mew were able to finish off the Sea Dragon thanks to it. I’d say that blade’s a good luck charm and a last resort if need be. According to these texts, its power can apparently rival the Demon Lord’s might.”

“I see. No wonder it could kill the Sea Dragon.”

“Still, it couldn’t have been done without mew, Ein. I’ve gotta thank Chris for translating the text for me-ow!”

After letting out a dry chuckle, Ein realized how thankful he was for Chris’s hard work.

“If I were to wager a guess, the blade was already in the treasury when the Dullahan’s stone joined it. From there, the sword must’ve been lying in wait until it came into your pawssession, Ein.” Katima flicked through the stack of documents. “Lastly, I want mew to look at this.”

With the title at the top of the page, Ein could tell that there was something important written down on the pages to come. He took a sip of water before he started reading.

“Let’s see...” he said. “Theories on the Demon Lord’s actions and my suspicions of a sole betrayal.”

“Indeed! To tell mew the truth, this is where the infurrnation gets juicy!”

Enticed by Katima’s enthusiasm, Ein eagerly scanned the pages in front of him. The Elven author had researched numerous legends over the course of a long life. The elf’s research implied that they were greatly invested in the Demon Lord’s history and the ways in which it seemed to contradict his actions. The pages in Ein’s hands primarily consisted of the author’s thoughts.

Yes, the Demon Lord did attack Ishtarica, but I can’t help but wonder how such a powerful force suddenly appeared. The Demon Lord’s might was simply overwhelming; it could wipe out an entire village with the casting of a single spell. The war cost us many lives, but it finally ended once the Demon Lord, the Dullahan, and the Elder Lich fell.

I’ve been curious about the Demon Lord’s pair of associates. Why did the Dullahan prefer to stand back and let his enemies come to him? And why did the Elder Lich aim only to ruin lives instead of taking them with attack spells?

I shall be blunt. If the Dullahan had gone on the offensive or if the Elder Lich had crushed the land with a simple display of her magical might, Ishtarica would’ve lost the war. Did they underestimate humanity? That seems unlikely. From the start of the war to their

dying breaths, neither of them ever showed a pointed, murderous intent.

There is one more matter that I must make a record of. The Demon Lord had another confidant: a red fox woman. While the Demon Lord and the inner circle were on the front lines, she refused to budge from their base or even move a muscle to assist them. When all was said and done, her body was never found. Apparently her species also disappeared without a trace.

The red foxes are a species shrouded in mystery. They're said to be hedonists that enjoy playing tricks on humans, but any other details about them are unknown. Since they'd never willingly show themselves, the foxes' traits and goals remain an enigma...and that is the extent of my findings. As such, I'll leave you with a theory cultivated from my research.

It's highly possible that this red fox woman had caused the Demon Lord to go berserk.

"So I've read through it," Ein said. "But I have no idea what this is... What does it mean?"

It was common knowledge that the Demon Lord had rampaged across the nation, taking many lives until the first king finally managed to defeat it.

"It means that *something* caused the Demon Lord to go off the deep end," Katima replied. "And it's theorized that a single monster was behind it, my furr-end."

"If true, wouldn't this discovery change history? That means that the Demon Lord actually wasn't an aggressive warmonger."

"Purreciselty. Take a look at this picture."

Katima handed Ein an illustration of a beautiful girl with silver locks of hair. Sporting an ephemeral visage, the girl appeared to be around fifteen years old.

"Who is she?" Ein asked.

"The Demon Lord," Katima replied.

"What?! You're kidding!"

"Nope. There are multiple depictions of the Demon Lord that corroborate this, so I'm pawsitive of it."

This supposed Demon Lord seemed to be more at home in a field of flowers instead of on a battlefield. Ein was stunned by this revelation.

"Mew remember the magic stone in the audience room? That's her stone."

"But based on appearance, it doesn't look like she'd do anything evil."

“I agree with mew, but one must never judge a book by its cover. And if we were to believe the researcher’s notes, she could’ve been manipulated by a member of her inner circle.”

“Would that even happen to someone like the Demon Lord?”

“Who knows, but throwing away the idea would be foolish.”

Ein silently nodded in agreement. The entire tome hadn’t been translated just yet, but he was able to read through the important part for the time being. Tormented by a myriad of feelings that he couldn’t possibly begin to put into words, Ein soon left the research facility.

As leaves started falling from the trees that lined the city’s streets, Ishtarica’s citizens could be seen exhaling cool puffs of white in the chilly mornings and evenings. After leaving Katima’s lab, Ein changed his clothing before joining Krone by the courtyard’s waterways. It was still just before dusk.

“You guys sure eat a lot,” Ein muttered as he gazed at the pair of Sea Dragons.

While resting their cute little faces on the surrounding foliage, the pair voraciously scarfed down any meat and magic stones offered to them. They didn’t show a bit of aggression; in fact, it was quite the adorable sight. Ein had named the older sister El, and the younger brother Al.

“Nom nom nom!” the dragons growled as they continued to eat.

There were a few complications along the way, but Ein had received permission to raise the twins. Everyone in the castle was flabbergasted when the crown prince returned with the wriggly pair by his side.

In a state of complete shock, Silverd could only reply with a curt “Return those monsters from whence they came.”

However, Lalalua and Olivia had grown fond of the friendly little noodles. Unable to refute his grandson, Silverd finally gave him the go-ahead.

The twins were doing just fine within the castle’s waterways, but it was only a matter of time before they would outgrow their humble home. The waterways also led to the beach behind the castle, allowing one to see the twins playing around in the sand every now and then. Ein and Krone knelt to get a closer look at the baby dragons.

“I thought they were referred to as ‘Kings of the Sea,’” Krone said as she let out a giggle. “Yet they’re so cute.”

Ein watched on as she gave the squiggly pair a beatific smile. Even though he was staring at her from the side, the crown prince was mesmerized by her beauty. Her fair complexion, glimmering eyes, and long lashes blended together with her sweet aroma to paint a lovely

picture, one that Ein couldn't look away from. He was enchanted, even if she was just feeding a pair of baby dragons.

"Do you want some?" Krone asked.

"Huh? Uh, I guess..." Ein mumbled, assuming that she'd asked if he wanted her.

However, Ein had assumed wrong.

"Well, I suppose there's no helping it," Krone said, offering him a magic stone that the Sea Dragons were going to eat.

A stunned Ein blinked several times as he took hold of the stone. He continued to glance at the stone and back at Krone.

"A-A magic stone?" he asked quizzically.

"That's right... I thought you wanted to eat some."

Krone tilted her head to one side in an innocent bout of confusion. It was only then that Ein understood what she had meant by "Do you want some?" Puzzled by his own thoughts, Ein looked away while giving an exaggerated "Thank you" in an attempt to hide his embarrassment.

"Right!" he shouted. "Watching those two eat made me a little hungry!"

He proceeded to absorb the stone—it was the perfect snack.

"Ripple," he mumbled as the taste hit his palate.

Krone giggled. "I suppose El and Al are gluttons just like their father, are they not?"

"I wonder..." Ein replied.

"Come now. Don't pout."

He wasn't pouting at all. Ein was actually so embarrassed by the "do you want some" exchange that he couldn't bear to look Krone in the eyes. Luckily for him, she had no idea what was going on.

"Rawr!"

"Rarr!"

"Sorry," Ein said in response to the dragon's adorable yelps. He scattered some more food onto the water's surface. "Here's seconds."

"Raaawr!"

"Rarr!"

Finally satisfied, the dragons let out a few energetic squeals before diving into the water. After staring into the ocean's waves for a good bit, Krone brought herself to her feet.

"Ein, if you don't mind, would you like to join me for tea?"

"Sure, thanks for the invite. Are you going to serve it to me?"

"I shall. If you don't mind, that is," she said with a giggle. Krone seemed to be enjoying this little exchange.

"What if I keep asking for seconds?"

"Then I shall keep pouring tea until you're satisfied, Ein. I'd get to talk with you more that way too."

“That sounds great.”

Ein stood up and started walking alongside Krone.

“The twins are quite good at swimming,” Ein remarked. “I’d love to learn a thing or two from them.”

“Oh, are you preparing for another undersea battle?” Krone asked.

“Cut me some slack, please. I still feel guilty about that day.”

“I’m kidding. I’ll pour you a delicious cup of tea, so forgive me, okay?”

As they walked, Ein took note of Krone’s lively smile. In fact, he felt himself starting to crack a smile as well.

Meanwhile, a triennial martial arts tournament was being held in the trading city of Bardland. Across the sea and to the north of Heim, the bustling city was quite far away from Ishtarica. Often pledging neutrality, Bardland was surrounded by Heim, Euro, and Rockdam.

Fighters from across the continent would flock to the city for this rarely held event. The tournament also served as a lucrative business opportunity for the many store owners and merchants who often passed through the trading hub.

The tournament’s final bout had gotten underway, whipping the crowd into a frenzy. This year’s finalists were no strangers, as they had faced each other for three tournaments straight, a rare feat. The duelists both used a multitude of advanced techniques that had captivated many across the continent.

“Tsk! You still remain standing,” Rogas growled, out of breath.

Rogas glared at his opponent, who had parried the last swing of his greatsword. His position as the commander in chief of Heim’s army came with a confidence in his abilities, but Rogas’s valiant expression now carried a tinge of impatience.

“You’ve grown much stronger in the past three years. I hardly recognize you,” Rogas’s foe replied.

“That sounds like sarcasm!” Rogas roared. “Raaah!”

The commander in chief’s opponent was a middle-aged representative of the Principality of Euro, a nation with business ties to Ishtarica. The gentleman’s name was Edward, and he was a close friend of Euro’s Prince Amur since the prince’s childhood. The two were so close that Edward was even a member of the prince’s inner circle.

Despite facing off against Rogas for the past three tournaments now, Edward had made it to the final bout for six straight competitions. He’d been the winner of five, besting Rogas two of those times. Edward was so formidable that Heim had become particularly wary of him.

“Your blow is much too heavy for me to take head-on,” Edward observed. “It’s getting tough for an old-timer like me.”

“Hmph!” Rogas replied. “As always, your way around a spear is unnatural!”

Rogas continued his barrage of attacks, but not one of them landed on Edward. There were times where Edward was pushed back as result of a whiffed parry, but his graceful dexterity allowed him to roll out of the way with ease. The strength behind his occasional but deadly counterattacks often outclassed the might of a cannon blast.

“Mercy me, I’m shocked,” Edward said. “I’m afraid I wouldn’t last long if you managed to hit me.”

“Then why don’t you do me a favor and take the hit already?” Rogas replied.

“I still have much work to do, so I’ll have to turn down your offer. All the more reason to end this, I suppose.”

Quick as a flash, Edward closed the gap by nimbly dodging the viscount’s strikes. After baiting Rogas into swinging his sword, the spearman used the hilt of his opponent’s blade to throw him off-balance. Edward used the opportunity to immediately point the tip of his spear at Rogas’s throat.

“The winner is Edward, from the Principality of Euro!”

When Rogas came of age and was initially appointed to be the commander in chief of Heim’s army, he was never on the losing side of a duel. However, his winning streak had ended upon facing Edward for the first time. The spearman was the only man within the continent that could make Rogas admit defeat.

“We had a fine clash as we always do. Here,” Edward said, offering his hand.

Rogas looked clearly frustrated, but he slowly took the hand and got up.

“When will I ever defeat you?” Rogas muttered. “It’s always on my mind.”

“I’m sure you will one day,” Edward replied. “You’re very powerful and still quite young.”

“Heh... It’s encouraging to hear you say that.”

Glint looked on from the stands. The boy had never once seen his father lose before. The viscount could take on a legion of knights without breaking a sweat, but he seemed more like a flailing child in battle with the spearman. The young Roundheart was stunned.

“Mother!” Glint declared. “I shall one day avenge my father!”

Camilla smiled, pleased to hear her son’s words. “I’m sure you will, Glint. You’re destined to become a Holy Knight, after all.”

Born with the rare skill of the same name, the would-be Holy Knight was blessed with many talents. Glint’s prowess grew rapidly,

surpassing those around him without the need for much effort on his part. Another one of the boy's boons came in the form of his fiancée, Shannon. She was an adorable redhead who possessed the skill known as Blessing. This very skill had the potential to elevate Glint into the legendary role of a Heavenly Knight one day; it was a fact that the boy hadn't forgotten. Camilla couldn't contain her excitement for her son's future.

Within Bardland's most decadent inn, a member of the royal family was on pins and needles waiting for a report. Despite his nation's representation in the tournament's final bout, he had remained in his room and missed the duel.

"H-Hasn't she been found yet?!" the boy yelled.

His name was Tiggie von Heim, the third prince of the Heim Kingdom. He would turn fourteen this year, meaning that he was four years Ein's senior. For the past few years, Tiggie had been searching for a certain lady who had stolen his heart. It was said that she was last seen in Bardland before her disappearance.

"Y-Your Highness, I beg for your patience. I believe we'll receive a report soon."

"Why? Why?! Where have you gone, Krone?!" Tiggie bellowed in fury.

Ever since he was a young boy, Krone was the one lady that he'd desperately wanted to be his wife. He found her stunning, her beauty complemented by her glimmering hair that dazzled all who saw it. The slightest bit of small talk hinted at her intelligence, and it pleased Tiggie to have exchanged a few words with her. To the prince, Krone was an absolutely flawless lady.

Using the former grand duke's disappearance as a convenient excuse, the prince had managed to squeeze out some of the kingdom's coin and hire adventurers to search for the missing aristocrats. The results weren't promising: the prince's efforts hadn't turned up any leads.

"Harley!" Tiggie shouted. "How can you remain so calm?"

As Krone's father, Harley was actually quite familiar with the whereabouts of his daughter and father.

"If I may, Your Highness," Harley started. "My wife Elena and I have endured this grief for a long time. When I was informed that my daughter and father had disappeared, I considered ending my own life. But upon witnessing your concern for her, I felt that I must remain strong. Both as her father and as your subject, I'll do whatever I can to find my family."

Harley's excuse was sound, and Tiggie's chest twinged with pain upon hearing those words.

“I’m sorry,” the prince apologized. “It must be even more painful for you and your family.”

“I’m only honored, grateful, and humbled to receive your kind concern.”

But of course, this was all an act. Thanks to a letter from a few years back, Harley had been informed that his daughter had safely reunited with Ein and was living happily in Ishtarica. He hadn’t heard a thing about her since.

Suddenly, there were a few large knocks against the door before a knight hastily entered the room.

“Your Highness! I’ve just received a report!”

Tiggle was excited to hear about it. “Very well! Speak!”

“Yes, Your Highness! We’ve found the lodging that the two missing aristocrats last used, along with their carriage! We finally have some sort of lead!”

“Excellent work!” Tiggle praised. “Carry on! After so long, finally!”

It’d taken a lot of time and money for the prince to come this far. It seemed that even the royal family couldn’t easily see through the web of deception that Graff had spun.

“Harley, you may just be able to reunite with your father and Krone very soon!”

Tiggle had innocently and foolishly believed that the two were safe. Rumors had swirled among the aristocrats that they might have been killed or sold off as slaves. Harley found Tiggle’s earnest hope admirable while also knowing that the prince’s love would be unrequited.

“Your Highness, I greatly appreciate your efforts,” Harley said. “My wife is always incredibly grateful to you as well. Once they’re found, I’ll see to it that both my father and Krone thank you personally.”

“If that’s the case, I’d like to take Krone as my wife,” Tiggle said.

“Since a prince can provide her with something invaluable, I’m sure you can win over Krone’s heart.”

This awkward conversation made little sense. Even if Krone was found, there was no chance Tiggle could provide her with an invaluable gift.

“Ha ha ha!” Tiggle laughed. “Indeed! And for that, I must dedicate myself to the search effort more than ever!”

Harley’s words weren’t all a lie. Indeed, a certain prince would make Krone happy. Where this prince was from was a detail that the grand duke neglected to specify. However, the meaning of certain words tends to change depending on who hears them. Tiggle let out a joyful laugh before a knight whispered into his ear.

“What? There are signs that Krone headed for Euro?” Tigger asked. “Preposterous! Then I must head there at once!”

The grand duke was a little troubled. Should he stop the prince here? But if he did, Harley wasn't sure of what kind of response he'd receive; he'd make some people suspicious at the very least. In the end, Krone's father gave a slightly concerned laugh as he gazed at the high-spirited Tigger.

Chapter Two: Proxy

“Tomorrow’s the day, Ein. You will finally be setting sail for Euro,” Silverd said.

The king was lounging on a sofa in Olivia’s room. If one stepped out and onto the terrace, they would be greeted by the twinkling night sky and the glistening cityscape below. In fact, the royal capital’s beaming lights made the city look like a jewelry box.

Two months had passed since Ein had slain the Sea Dragon in a grisly confrontation. Once the crown prince’s house arrest was over, the curtains would rise on another adventure.

“It might be a bit late for me to say this,” Ein started, “but I’m getting a little nervous. I wonder if I can fulfill my duties as your proxy.”

“Warren and the others will be by your side. There’s nothing for you to worry about,” the king said, reassuring the boy.

“I *am* reassured by Warren’s presence. I just hope I can adequately play my role...”

Olivia sat on a sofa with Ein on her lap. The boy’s mother flashed a gentle smile at the worrying prince while brushing her son’s freshly bathed hair.

“You’ll be fine,” Olivia added. “You might have to worry about Chris’s...lack of coordination, but she can do anything if she puts her mind to it.”

Olivia’s saintly smile resembled Krone’s. The second princess had just stepped out of the bath and was dressed in a thin garment that accentuated her figure. Ein found himself slightly blushing as a result of her ever-bewitching appearance.

“Warren will handle the majority of our business deals. Ein, you simply need to remain at Chris’s side and refrain from acting on your own... Speaking of which, you’re not to go off on your own as you did during the Sea Dragon incident. Is that clear?” Silverd warned.

“I-I won’t!” Ein replied.

“Oh, Ein...” Olivia cooed.

“Ha ha ha! I’d be grateful if you stayed put for a while, Ein!” Silverd said.

The king gave a hearty laugh while the second princess giggled at Ein’s hasty remarks. This sort of peaceful family gathering would also be put on hold while the prince was away.

“Now that I think about it, this is the first time I’ll be leaving the castle for longer than a few days,” Ein remarked.

“Indeed,” Silverd agreed.

“Will you be all right, Ein?” Olivia asked. “You don’t have to force yourself through it if you don’t want to.”

“Olivia, don’t be so brazen in front of me.”

“Hee hee, I’m just kidding.”

Olivia innocently giggled in response, but Ein was certain about one thing. *If I really said that I didn’t want to go, I’m sure mother would do something about it.* Olivia simply prioritized her son’s desires that much. Ein wasn’t planning on manipulating his mother’s feelings so he could skip out on his duties, but her love was a warm and comforting blanket.

“Take care of yourself, Ein,” Olivia said.

“Of course. I shall do so,” Ein replied.

Tonight’s spot of small talk went on for a little longer than usual. The trio shared their feelings of loneliness; a true sign of their familial love.

The next morning, Ein woke up a few hours early before setting sail from the royal capital’s port. He was aboard Ishtarica’s largest warship, the *White King*—a vessel reserved for the king’s sole use.

With winter approaching, a cold breeze began to blow across Euro’s waters. Built facing the seaside, Prince Amur’s castle was known for becoming especially cold during the winter, as it was often blasted by frosty winds.

As Amur stood near Euro’s docks, he was seemingly unfazed by the cold. The prince intently listened to the words of his nearby companion, Edward.

“Indeed...” Edward muttered. “We couldn’t have imagined them to be this large, my prince.”

“W-Were these truly made by human hands?” Amur gasped.

Three ships were docking at Euro’s port. Another large Ishtarican ship had already docked by a cape on the other side of the castle. While that ship had been a shocking sight for the prince to behold, the trio of ships in front of him was even bigger. And the colossal center ship of this small fleet far outclassed its companions in terms of both size and beauty.

“That massive vessel... It’s so beautifully crafted,” Amur said with awe.

“That must be the Ishtarican king’s famous warship, the *White King*,” Edward replied.

Its massive hull was twice the size of any normal warship and

shimmered bright white without a spot to be seen. The *White King* could've been larger than Amur's castle, not to mention the astounding arsenal that surrounded the goliath beast of a ship. This vessel could have easily conquered an entire nation on its own.

"E-Ed!" Prince Amur cried. "Does my appearance suffice? I hope I'm not being rude to our guests!"

"You look magnificent," Edward replied. "Their nation boasts both technology and an impressive culture. If we face them with sincerity and earnestness, I'm confident that we won't upset them."

The prince's position had slipped his mind for a split second and he required his knight's reassurance. Amur could only muster enough strength to remain calm in the face of Ishtarica's display of overwhelming power. The roar of a steam whistle echoed in the air, signaling that the pair of massive ships flanking the *White King* had docked. A legion of well-dressed knights emerged from the vessels before descending a steam-filled ramp. The knights proceeded to position themselves on both sides of the *White King's* ramp.

"They must be the Knights Guard: the best knights Ishtarica has to offer. They appear to be well disciplined; not one of them appears to be out of place. I can only watch on in admiration," Edward observed.

"If they chose this moment to invade, I fear our castle would fall in an instant," Amur muttered.

"Whatever are you saying, my prince?" Edward replied, laughing as though the prince had just told a joke.

"R-Right... I-I suppose we'd last longer than an instant..."

"I believe the battle would be as good as over the moment their ships made landfall."

Edward's pessimistic remarks had Amur slumping his shoulders, but it wasn't a claim he could deny. Equipped with a nation's worth of cannons and magical tools, the trio of warships were Ishtarica's strongest. Had they approached for battle at such close range, the Principality of Euro wouldn't have stood a chance. While the pair was talking, a quartet of visitors disembarked from the *White King*. The group walked down the path lined by the Knights Guard before approaching Amur and Edward.

"Prince Amur, please do your best to appear fearless," Edward whispered.

"I-Indeed," the prince replied.

With every step the group took towards Amur, he felt his heart beating louder and louder. A handful of seconds felt like hours as he nervously waited for his guests.

The Euroan prince had finally come face-to-face with Warren.

"I'm delighted to meet you. I am Ishtarica's chancellor, Warren Lark."

“I-I’m Amur von Euro; I lead Euro as its prince.”

“Your name is well-known even in these parts, Sir Warren. My name is simply Edward. I’m but an elderly servant who has watched over the prince since he was a boy.”

“Ah! So *you’re* Sir Edward!” Warren exclaimed. “I’m honored to have received such praise. I know your name quite well myself; I heard that you prevailed over your vicious competition and claimed victory in the recent tournament.”

For a split second, Edward’s eyebrows twitched. This tournament had been held in a different continent, yet the chancellor was still aware of Amur’s retainers’ doings.

“I must simply offer my gratitude to our guardian angel, who blessed me with the victory,” Edward humbly replied.

“Indeed? It’s splendid that you have a strong faith.” Warren proceeded to stand aside. “I suppose we shouldn’t be talking at length. Allow me to introduce you to Crown Prince Ein. He is here as a proxy for His Majesty, King Silverd.”

Ein was dressed in his usual royal attire along with a mantle that had the royal family’s crest embroidered upon it.

“Pleased to meet you. I’m Ein von Ishtarica and I’ve come to Euro as the king’s proxy. I pray that our meetings will be edifying.”

Though still a child, Ein’s confident and clear tone gave the boy a valiant presence—no doubt thanks to Warren’s instruction. During their voyage, Warren had told Ein that while he didn’t need to speak in a condescending manner or flaunt his rank, there was no need for him to treat the Euroans as complete equals. This was something Ein would need to feel out for himself, but it was best if he spoke confidently while making subtle indications of his ranking. Both Prince Amur and Edward were able to sense that the boy’d had a proper royal upbringing.

“Indeed,” Amur replied. “I am also quite grateful to make your acquaintance, Prince Ein. Now then, this is no place to talk, and I wouldn’t want you to catch a cold. Why don’t I guide you to my castle?”

With that, the talks between Ishtarica and Euro had begun. Ein breathed a sigh of relief knowing that the introductions were over with. At the same time, Warren and Chris whispered into his ear, praising his earlier actions.

Ein and his party followed closely behind the Euroans until Chris was suddenly stopped in her tracks.

“Huh?” she murmured, proceeding to gaze at Euro’s castle town.

The town’s overcast skies were in stark contrast to sunny Ishtarica, which boasted a beautiful city built with the assistance of refined technology. Euro instead seemed a bit more wild and rural—the

streets were lined with homes constructed from chunks of carved stone, and livestock grazed in their yards. The edge of town led to a large stone wall, a clear defensive measure to protect the town from Euro's enemies.

However, Chris was looking beyond all of that.

"What's wrong, Chris?" Ein asked.

"A-Ah, my apologies. I just sensed a horse approaching us at full speed."

"A horse?" Ein said, tilting his head to one side.

"Perhaps it's part of training carried out by the principality," Warren suggested. "This nation is well-known for their skilled equestrians."

Ein and Chris nodded in agreement, believing that whatever she had sensed wasn't anything to be worried about. They chased after Prince Amur and set foot in the castle of Euro.

Now inside, Ein and his compatriots took their seats in the castle's grand conference room. Amur was in the middle of confirming the contents of a letter Warren had passed over to him. Everyone was sitting around an oval table; Ein and the Ishtaricans occupied one side while the Euroans sat on the other. Their meeting hadn't started just yet, but Edward was already nodding along.

"Hm? What's the matter, Ed?" Amur asked.

"Ah, nothing much. I was just a little perplexed by Prince Ein," Edward replied.

"How so?"

"It's quite odd; his physicality doesn't imply a high caliber. However, standing within his presence feels as though I'm staring down an imposing monster. I can't wrap my mind around it."

Ein had deftly carried himself within the Euroan's presence—rather fitting for the crown prince of what was arguably the world's largest nation. Amur was impressed by the boy.

"I don't understand," Amur replied.

Edward couldn't grasp why he felt this way.

"I apologize. I don't understand it either," Edward replied. As he discussed Ein's hidden power, the spearman pointed out the knight standing behind the boy. "In terms of solo combat, I believe Marshal Christina to be the strongest in the land. However, if one should face a monster, Prince Ein might just be the mightier combatant."

"I don't get it at all. Why would it not be Dame Christina?" Amur asked as he scanned the letter. He found himself drawn to Ein. "Ed, Prince Ein is still a young boy."

"However, I cannot ignore this gut feeling of mine. How much

power does he truly possess?"

There was ultimately no answer to be found, but Prince Amur regained his composure and turned to Warren.

"Sir Warren, I thank you for your patience. I've just read the letter, and it undoubtedly conveys King Silverd's boundless generosity and kindness."

"That's excellent news to hear," Warren replied.

"I believe our arrangement regarding the new trade route and the official publicizing of our amicable partnership will be nothing but beneficial for the people of Euro. I'm very grateful." Prince Amur smiled with joy. "Now then, why don't we start by confirming the contents of this letter and proceed with our business discussions? I pray that the results will be beneficial to both of our nations."

The meeting had properly commenced, with Amur speaking for Euro while Warren did the same for Ishtarica. Ein let out a slight sigh, relieved to know their talks had started off on the right foot. As he'd predicted, the meeting proceeded smoothly without a hitch. The crown prince simply needed to sit next to Warren, listen to the conversation, and give the occasional nod or two. Given that business deals were a bit beyond Ein at this point, the negotiations would be treated as a learning experience while the chancellor handled the meat of it.

Two hours had passed since the meeting had started, and both parties were starting to grow tired.

"My goodness, we've had such a productive meeting that I've forgotten to call for a break," Amur said before making a suggestion. "Why don't we go out for a breath of fresh air? I shall show you the city from within the prized castle we're currently standing in. Especially the view from behind the castle."

"The winds have calmed down, so I believe it won't be very chilly either," Edward quipped.

Ein and Warren glanced at each other and nodded. The long meeting had left the pair a little weary.

"Very well. I would love to see that view. Warren, kindly lead the way," Ein said.

"Certainly. Prince Amur, if you would do us the honors, please," Warren said.

"Wonderful. Then let us depart. Ed, if you'd please guide us," Amur replied.

"Your wish is my command," Edward obediently said.

Amur and Edward rose from their seats and left the room. Ein followed suit with Chris and Dill flanking his sides. While Warren led the group, the Knights Guard members who had been standing outside brought up the rear once the entire party had exited the room.

“We’ve got a crowd...” Ein said, unable to help himself from cracking a joke.

“Good grief...” Chris said. “This is only natural when your rank is taken into consideration.”

“I know, I know. Just having you by my side puts me at ease.”

Ein didn’t seem particularly nervous as he scanned the castle’s interiors. The sizable citadel was a fresh sight for the eyes, as it greatly differed from the halls of White Night castle.

“There’s nothing like this at home,” Ein commented.

“Indeed,” Chris replied. “We used stone, ores, and even monster materials to build White Night.”

Like the town itself, Euro’s castle seemed to have its own rustic charm. While the floors were covered in luxurious carpeting and the walls lined with immaculate statues, the castle’s halls were permeated by a rural, slightly unwelcoming atmosphere. It was safe to say that White Night’s rugs were a bit more plush. As they walked along, Prince Amur turned to Warren.

“By the way, I was planning to share a piece of news with you, Sir Warren. We’ve found a large sea crystal on the ocean floor. It was where your ship is currently docked, actually.”

“Is that right?” Warren replied. “That’s wonderful. How large is the crystal, if I may ask?”

“It’s about the size of one of our small fishing boats. It’s quite large, you see.”

Not bothering to hide his surprise, Warren’s eyes widened as he heard the good news. Such a sizable sea crystal had never been discovered before, not even in Ishtarica. One couldn’t help but smile upon realizing just how many magical tools could be crafted thanks to a single crystal.

“I didn’t think it would be that large,” Warren murmured. “Pardon me, it’s simply impossible to remain calm. I’ve never heard of a crystal of that size.”

“I don’t blame you,” Amur replied. “Once our meeting is over, I can hopefully fill you in on the details.”

“I’d be very grateful. It must be quite the pain to excavate a crystal of that size. Perhaps we can collaborate on a plan for it once the necessary documents are provided.”

The statesmen were supposed to be on a break, yet business deals had become the crux of their conversation.

“Oh dear,” Edward said before he proceeded to scold Amur. “Your Highness Amur, are we not on break? Perhaps we should save this conversation for another time.”

“Ah, you’re right,” Amur replied as his face contorted into an awkward frown. The group continued to make their way to the

castle's rear from there.

Ein was soon greeted by the sight of a cape covered in lush fields of green grass.

"We've built a staircase into the slope of this cape," Amur explained. "You can go down to the shore from here, but please be careful as you step down."

Ein nodded and walked forward. True to his word, the view Prince Amur had promised was indeed magnificent. The boy found himself enchanted by the visual splendor of vivid green alongside the splashing, cobalt-blue sea. White flowers lined both sides of the well-maintained stone staircase leading down to the shore. It was so different from the rest of Euro that Ein was convinced he was stepping into another world. The only blemish on this scene appeared to be the overcast Euroan skies.

"The ocean breeze feels nice," Ein said as the winds brushed against his cheeks.

"I'm glad that it seems to please you, Prince Ein. Now if you'd follow me this way..." Prince Amur said in a jolly tone before he stopped himself at the top of the stairs. "Hm? Edward, why are there knights down there?"

"Perhaps something has happened. No one is allowed back here without your express permission. I also doubt someone would simply try to walk in. Excuse me, my prince," Edward replied before he approached the group of knights. "Now, for what reason are you here, my fellow knights?"

"A-Ah, Sir Edward!" a knight gasped. "And Prince Amur! I didn't expect our Ishtarican guests to be here either."

"Indeed. We're here to show our esteemed guests this wonderful view of our nation. May I ask again as to why *you're* gathered here?"

"W-We're here guarding our guests as they enjoy the view as well."

Edward scratched his head; this excuse made little sense to him. Their only guests were the Ishtaricans and they'd only just stepped out from the castle.

"Pardon me," Warren chimed in. "Did someone from our nation cause you any trouble?"

"N-Not at all! Certainly not!" the knight hastily replied. "By guests, I mean..."

"Gah, I've had enough of your dawdling! Enough!" Amur roared.

Today was an important day for the prince of Euro, and he was currently in the middle of hosting the nation's most valuable guests. He was clearly angered by the presence of these uninvited interlopers. Ignoring the knight, the prince pressed on towards the cape.

"Hm. Sir Edward, were you entertaining guests other than

ourselves, perhaps?" Warren asked.

"Certainly not. I haven't heard a thing; I doubt Prince Amur has either," Edward replied.

Initially, the group had stayed behind while Edward dealt with this unexpected headache. However, as Prince Amur headed down to the shore, the rest of the party followed. Once they arrived, the Ishtaricans soon noticed that Amur had been confronted by another band of knights who happened to have a well-dressed boy among their ranks.

Caught off guard at the sight of the boy, Amur exclaimed, "Wh-Why are you here?"

The boy appeared to have noticed Amur's presence and opened his mouth. "So you're finally here, under my watch! Good grief, you're late!"

Amur was left stunned by the young boy's boorish comments. The Euroan prince was gazing into the eyes of Heim's third prince, Tigger von Heim. Warren couldn't help but let out a dry chuckle once he finally saw the root of this ruckus.

"My, my. I certainly couldn't have predicted an outcome such as this," the chancellor said, stroking his beard as he stared at Tigger.

As expected of the third prince of Heim, he was dressed in lavish clothes befitting his position. The expensive armor adorning the boy's knights implied that they were no mere soldiers; they were members of Heim's Knights Guard.

"Hm? Prince Amur, who are those people behind you? Did you keep me waiting as you attended to other guests?" Tigger asked.

"Wh-Whatever are you on about?! We never agreed to any sort of meeting!" Amur shouted.

"Indeed, but I've received a letter from my father. This is an official visit, so to speak."

Tigger's actions appeared to be rather self-serving, but this seemed to be a normal thing for him. Even with his power, Amur was unable to remove his royal guest from Heim, especially considering the sway the kingdom held over the continent.

"Did something happen?" Ein asked, just as he was arriving with Chris and Dill in tow.

"Erm, it seems like it. Please don't leave my side," Chris said.

"Okay." Thoughts swirled within his mind. "But I wonder what's — Huh?!"

Ein's heart almost stopped at the sight of the blond boy in front of him. Before the crown prince could say anything, the other boy had already opened his mouth.

"Impossible. It can't be! Why... Why are *you* alive?!" the boy gasped.

“What’s with all the ruckus, Glint?” Tiggle asked.

“Your Highness, that man over there is...” Before Glint had even fully extended his finger at Ein, Chris already had her hand firmly on her blade. “That’s my older brother! He may no longer share my house, but he shares my blood! That’s Ein Roundheart!”

Glint’s voice still attested to his young age, but his tone wielded a degree of power. Amid the tense atmosphere, Ein turned towards his younger brother.

“Long time no see, Glint. Chris, Dill, keep your hands away from your blades, all right?”

“Yes, Your Highness,” Dill said reluctantly.

However, Chris couldn’t find it in her to be as obedient. “B-But Sir Ein!” she stammered. “I... The Roundhearts... How dare he speak so casually! I cannot forgive him!”

“I know,” Ein replied. “I know your thoughts very well.”

“Then...”

“But you can’t. As the crown prince, I mustn’t turn my back on the first king’s own words.”

Ein placed his hand over Chris’s, forbidding her from launching the first strike. The new marshal still couldn’t agree to this, but Ein quietly said, “I’ll be fine.”

She finally relented and gave a small nod.

“I *always* make sure to return the favor. I don’t always want to just be on the receiving end, so could you endure this all for now?” Ein pleaded as he flashed a mischievous smirk.

And with that, Chris’s explosive animosity faded away for the moment.

“How could you be so nonchalant about all this?!” Glint roared.

“‘Long time no see,’ you say?!”

“Hm. You refuse to lower your head, and you’re insolent enough to point your finger and spout such remarks. I certainly cannot let this slide,” Warren said. The chancellor’s gaze pierced straight through Glint, causing the boy to falter.

Warren tried to end this exchange, but Ein raised his hand and stopped the chancellor. “Prince Amur. It seems that now certainly isn’t the time for a break. I’m grateful that I could step out for a breath of fresh air, but it seems that you have another guest to attend to.”

“B-Brother, why’re *you* taking charge of this—” Glint started, unable to read the room.

Slightly irritated by his brother’s lack of tact, Ein cut in with a regal and dignified reply, just as Warren had taught him. “Glint, if you’re truly the successor of an aristocratic household, you must remember there’s always a time and place for your actions. Perhaps it was unfitting of me to say ‘long time no see,’ but your words are

crossing the line.”

After years of being away from his brother, Glint had noticed that Ein now exuded an intense aura, something the younger brother had never felt before. Everyone turned silent at this unexpected turn of events as they tried to regain their composure.

Whatever the case, the other party couldn't be completely ignored.

“Why don't we simply ignore Heim?” Chris suggested.

Warren shot down the thought with a shake of his head. “Well then, shall we end the introductions?”

“I don't think it'll do us any good to stay here, Warren,” Ein said. “Why don't we return to the castle courtyard?”

“Indeed,” Warren replied. “Prince Amur, why don't we head back?”

“O-Of course! I very much like that idea!” Amur exclaimed.

“And that's that. Why don't you all join us?” Warren said, kindly smiling as he extended the offer to Tiggie and his group.

“Hey!” Glint screamed. “His Highness Tiggie is the third prince! Heed your insolent words!”

Warren gave a dry smile. Young Glint's loyalty was commendable, but Ein could barely suppress his anger.

“Glint, I'm the crown prince,” Ein countered. “Even a child like yourself surely knows who holds the higher rank between the crown prince and the third prince. If you aren't a fool ignorant of that, you'd best hold your tongue and come along!”

Ein stormed ahead without waiting for a reply, and Chris hurriedly ran behind him.

“S-Such impertinence!” Tiggie growled. “Let's go, Glint!”

“Yes, Your Highness!” Glint replied.

The pair of clearly angry nobles followed the crown prince's group, but remained silent as they watched Ein head for the courtyard. The nearby members of Ishtarica's Knights Guard didn't even glance at the citizens of Heim; they were trying to keep up with their crown prince.

“B-But the winds here are quite strong!” Tiggie remarked. “Whoa!”

“Your Highness, please watch your step!” Glint warned.

“R-Right!”

This mysterious wind didn't blow in Ein's direction.

“Chris,” Ein said. “Did you do something?”

“I most certainly did, but I'd prefer if you thanked me for letting them off so easily,” the marshal replied.

It seemed Chris had pelted the uninvited guests with her wind magic. Ein let out a lighthearted chuckle.

"I quite like that side of you, Chris," Ein said.

"Ah, erm, thank...you."

When the beautiful knight started blushing, she appeared more adorable than ever. The sight of Chris's embarrassment did a good job of quelling some of Ein's pent-up irritation. Warren then quietly approached Ein.

"You handled yourself splendidly," Warren praised joyfully. "I must report this back to His Majesty, Her Majesty, and Princess Olivia."

"I sort of used my rank to silence them, so it might've been a bit rude," Ein worriedly replied.

"Not at all. In fact, you could've been much harsher. Something like, 'You can't even succeed the throne, you blockhead! Know your place!' or another retort along those lines comes to mind. It's not a problem at all."

"Uh, Warren? Are you perhaps in a bit of a bad mood too?"

"Ah, I wonder..."

Warren had let it slide, but he certainly wasn't pleased with the earlier exchange. *But this has become troublesome...* Ein thought as he gazed up into the gray skies.

Once the party had arrived at the courtyard, Prince Amur was debating over allowing *all* of his guests to enter the castle. As the prince pondered it over, Tiggie saw fit to break the silence.

"Prince Amur, I'm here for one reason only," the third prince said. Curious about that very reason, everyone waited for Tiggie to continue speaking. "It has been a few years since the disappearance of my would-be wife, Krone August. Upon further investigation, I've discovered that she was last seen setting foot in Euro."

The Ishtaricans were befuddled by the revelation. Ein glanced to the side and noticed Warren grinning as he stroked his beard.

"The Principality of Euro officially started trade with Ishtarica a few years ago, is that correct?" Tiggie continued. "In other words, you sold off our beloved Grand Duke Graff August and my future fiancée, Krone August, to parts unknown! Am I wrong?"

Tiggie pointed his finger at Amur, unable to contain his emotions. The prince of Euro could only reply with a weary glance. Standing at his side, a frozen Edward had a similar expression on his face.

Confused, Ein whispered to his chancellor, "Warren..."

The chancellor gave a throaty chuckle. "Apologies, it seems the situation has taken a rather interesting turn."

Ein could relate. In fact, many from his Knights Guard seemed to be grinning or chuckling under their helmets.

"I believe the prince's words to be absurd, but I'd like to hear your thoughts," Ein said.

"As our nation is friendly with Euro, it's difficult for me to ignore a situation in which our ally is being portrayed as the villain," Warren replied. "Would you please leave this to me?"

"Don't go overboard," Ein said after a brief pause. The boy appeared to be concerned, hoping that his chancellor wouldn't be too harsh.

"We certainly do have a trade partnership with Ishtarica," Prince Amur replied. "But we're not involved in human trafficking."

"It's as Prince Amur says: we haven't bought or sold a soul," Warren added.

Indeed, they hadn't *sold* anyone, but they most certainly had *ferried* a special pair of nobles to a large nation. The Euroan prince and Ishtarican chancellor had chosen their words very carefully.

"And who are you to butt in on *our* conversation?" Tiggie accused. "What are you to Ishtarica?"

"Ah, pardon me," Warren said. "Sir Tiggie, I am the chancellor of Ishtarica."

"You dare call me 'sir'?"

Warren, however, didn't correct himself and continued, "My name is Warren Lark. I am pleased to meet you."

Tiggie was about to explode from anger, but he realized he could utilize this situation. "V-Very well! A chancellor, are you? How very convenient. I'm convinced that Krone is in Ishtarica, and I'd like for you to look into it."

"Are you trying to strike a deal with us?"

Warren's question surprised the entire party. The chancellor stroked his white beard, gazing into the distance while all eyes were focused on him.

"A-A deal?" Tiggie stammered.

"Yes. That's what I said," Warren calmly replied.

"Whatever are you on about?! A deal?! If you lot are involved in something nefarious, we should justifiably make that right!"

"Indeed. If there's a chance that we're involved in something of that sort, it must be fixed."

"H-Hmph! You're rather honest."

"Then why don't we start the investigation at once?" Warren turned to a member of the Knights Guard. "You, over there. You heard us, didn't you? Look into whether human trafficking is conducted in this region. I shall give you six months."

"Yessir!" the knight responded.

"How could you be so leisurely?!" Tiggie roared. "If we take that much time, we won't discover what happened to Krone!"

“Ah, indeed. Then I shall send word to my home country once this is all over,” Warren replied.

“You should’ve done so from the start! Once you’re done, you must report back to me—”

“Please be assured. Once we have conducted our investigation, we shall report back to our monarch.”

Satisfied with Warren’s swift and obedient actions, Tiggie had a smug look of satisfaction on his face. However, the nearby Glint didn’t see it that way.

“Your Highness, the result of this investigation won’t reach your ears, will it?” Glint asked.

Warren hadn’t stated anything of the sort. He declared that the results would be reported to *Silverd* without any further mention of Heim’s third prince.

“Of course it will. Am I wrong, Chancellor?” Tiggie asked.

“Hm?” Warren replied. “I don’t quite understand.”

“What are you saying? I’m talking about the results of the investigation regarding Krone.”

Warren raised his head in understanding. Ein did his best to not smile at his chancellor’s charade.

“Please be assured. Once we have conducted our investigation, we shall report back to our monarch,” Warren repeated.

“That’s not what I mean. You will report back to me, no?” Tiggie asked.

“If so, then we must strike a deal. We can conduct an investigation, but reporting back to you is another matter entirely.”

“Hey! What are you saying?!”

“Our nations have cut all friendly ties, have they not? It’s not as though we interact with each other either. You could say that we live in completely different worlds. To be frank, I can’t find the necessity in using our funds to simply report back to *you*. And as such, we must strike a deal if you’d like such information.”

Tiggie was frozen in a state of shock, as was Prince Amur. Only Warren’s fellow Ishtaricans maintained their cool demeanors, not even flinching for a split second.

“We simply cannot trust Heim’s royal family to keep their end of the bargain,” Warren continued. “I would like you to pay the cost up front. If you can do that, well... I suppose we can provide you with information on Lady Krone. Information that only we are privy to.”

The wide-eyed Tiggie was fully convinced that this old man knew something about Krone. Goading his opponent was an unusual strategy for the chancellor. Tiggie was already in the palm of Warren’s hand.

“If you’re taking us lightly, you’ll...” Tiggie started.

“Taking you lightly? Whatever do you mean? Please elaborate,” Warren interjected.

Heim’s third prince wasn’t able to come out swinging. When it came to negotiations, there was a wide gulf between his princely power and the sheer might wielded by Warren. Tiggie couldn’t deny that his nation was being rather selfish, taking advantage of Ishtarica’s refusal to strike first or invade other nations. When facing the Ishtarican chancellor, Tiggie would never gain the upper hand.

“And? What do you require as payment?” Tiggie asked.

“Well... If I were to request for a few heads, would you be able to prepare them?” Warren replied.

Warren’s sharp gaze suddenly became intense, exuding an experienced aura that was sure to terrify his opponent. It wasn’t hard to guess whose heads he desired.

“I suppose you’d like the head of the Viscount Rogas Roundheart... That, I can’t prepare for you,” Tiggie said.

“A pity. Then I suppose our negotiations have failed,” Warren said with an exaggerated slump of his shoulders. His actions implied that he was no longer open to further discussion.

“You bastard...”

However, Glint tightly clenched his fists as though he was trying to muster all of his courage. Tasked with guarding the third prince, the boy was now forced to display his resolve in the face of a formidable foreign chancellor.

“You show how small-minded you are, just as my brother was while in House Roundheart,” Glint murmured. Dill, who’d been quiet the entire time, twitched his eyebrows. “Your earlier statement is practically an admission of your involvement in human trafficking.”

“I am not, as I earlier stated,” Warren replied.

“Brother, why don’t you say something?” Glint demanded. “You let your subordinates do all the talking. As future king, are you not ashamed of your actions?”

Dill reached for the sword by his waist. Upon noticing his knight’s actions, Ein sighed at the murderous atmosphere.

“As I said earlier...” the crown prince started, rebuking his younger brother’s claims.

But Dill couldn’t contain his fury. “You display your insolence once again. Are you truly of Sir Ein’s blood? You may be unaware, but the crown prince is a hero. He single-handedly slew a dragon and saved the lives of many, a feat that makes him truly worthy of being called a hero. He isn’t one to be mocked so easily.”

“My brother? Slay a dragon?” Glint replied. “What nonsense are you on about?”

“I speak nothing but the truth. Your inability to accept it attests to

your small-mindedness.”

The back-and-forth continued as Ein tried to put an end to it.

“I suppose this is a good opportunity to declare the pecking order,” Warren muttered under his breath. He didn’t step in, choosing to use this turn of events.

“I was born with the Holy Knight skill. Are you saying my brother is stronger than me?” Glint accused. “Impossible! We could have a mock duel, knight. Just you and I, if you’d like.”

“W-Wait, Glint!” Ein hastily chimed in. “You’re still young and small...”

“Brother!” Glint roared back. “You dare insult me over such a trivial matter?!”

“That’s not what I mean...”

Glint wasn’t even ten yet, and Dill was at least five years his senior. There was a huge difference in terms of their size and stamina. *I feel like we’re just bullying them now.* And so, Ein considered stopping this all.

“He seems to be an important figure in Heim,” Warren said. “Perhaps it’s best for him to exchange blows with Dill; it would make a clear display of where we stand.”

An exhibition match... Ein looked up at Chris.

“Um, I won’t fight, all right?” Chris replied.

“Could I ask for a reason?” Ein asked.

“I’m not keen on fighting a battle where I look like the bully,” Chris whispered in his ear. “Of course, if you would like me to cut them down for their crimes against Ishtarica, I shall do so without hesitation.”

Chris was raring to go if this were an actual battle, but she didn’t feel the same when it came to a mock duel.

“I thought so,” Ein whispered back before he glanced at Dill.

Luckily for Glint, he had grown larger and he wasn’t much smaller than Dill actually. During Ein’s days at Roundheart Manor, the overly confident Glint had relied heavily on his skill. The boy had continued to train under his father’s eye after Ein’s departure, becoming strong enough to best adult knights. Everyone around Glint had great expectations for him in the future.

The party had moved to the castle’s training ground. Some time later, Warren gazed at the clashing swords and clouds of dust kicked up into the air.

“I didn’t think he’d be this strong,” a wide-eyed Warren noted as he nervously stroked his beard.

“I agree. I’m just as surprised,” Chris said with admiration.

In contrast to the chancellor, Ein stood beside the marshal in silence. However, he breathed a sigh of relief once the clanging of the sword started to echo in the air. The crown prince wiped away his freshly formed beads of sweat with a handkerchief.

“Chris,” Ein excitedly said. “Dill sure is strong.”

“He seems to have improved quite a bit,” Chris observed. “He’s always been one of Ishtarica’s rising stars, but I can’t help but be stunned by his recent growth.”

Before Ein’s eye was Glint with Dill’s sword pointed at his neck. Gracier’s swordsmanship had been developed to a refined and elegant point of its own. Meanwhile, Glint’s blows were constantly parried, throwing him off-balance. The young boy had fallen pathetically onto the ground.

“Glint!” Tiggie roared. “What are you doing?!”

“Y-Yes, Your Highness!” Glint replied.

Dill peered at Warren’s face, and the chancellor gave a troubled nod of his head.

“Then I suppose we can go one more round,” Warren relented.

Dill reluctantly spaced himself away from Glint before raising his sword. The would-be Heavenly Knight stood up, closed his eyes, and took a deep breath in. In the next moment, a bright light enveloped his body for a brief moment before it melted away inside him.

“I’m going all out,” Glint said.

The people of Heim started to look on with glee. In response to the cheering, Glint lowered his stance and stepped forward to close the gap with his opponent. Channeling his skill, the boy swung his sword down directly at Dill.

“I’m *always* going all out,” Dill said with a hint of sarcasm, before proceeding to parry the attack.

Angered by the retort, Glint’s face contorted in a fit of rage, growing redder and redder as he continued to slash away. Unlike the previous battle, the boy’s sword was surrounded by an aura of white light that left glittering afterimages with each swing. As the audience felt the battle’s intensity heating up, Dill calmly kept his blade at a horizontal angle while he was being pushed back by Glint’s strikes.

“Couldn’t keep up with my speed, huh?” Glint said with a snicker.

“No, I just noticed something at the moment you stepped forward,” Dill replied, knocking back Glint’s sword with minimal movement. “Your Holy Knight skill is indeed strong... However, in terms of pure swordsmanship alone, I clearly have the upper hand.”

Even if Glint had used his skill from the start, the gap in skill was clear as day. While Dill seemed to be getting pushed back, Glint’s blade had never reached him.

“Wha— H-How?!” Glint gasped.

In a flash, Dill had stepped past Glint.

“Every day I train with Ishtarica’s strongest knight, Lloyd,” Dill explained. “It’s all so I can be the most powerful knight at Sir Ein’s side one day. I’m different from you, one who uses their skill as a crutch!”

The pair of duelists froze, and silence fell upon the battlefield. It was soon broken by the loud clanking of Glint’s armor falling to the ground. With a thud, the straps holding the boy’s armored garments together were cleanly sliced in two—no doubt by Dill’s blade.



Glint fell onto the ground, faced with the clear gap in their power. With all of his stamina burnt up, the boy could no longer remain standing. Dill walked away from his fallen opponent and returned to Ein's side.

"Sir Ein, I dedicate this victory to you," Dill said, dryly smiling. "I hope he now rues the day he mocked you."

"I shouldn't say this about my own brother, but I doubt it," Ein replied.

"Ha ha... That's truly a pity."

Ein proceeded to commend his knight's actions during the duel, describing it as an impressive battle. The glowing praise had Dill smiling in embarrassment.

"While that boy is still no match for our Knights Guard, he indeed does have some talent," Dill observed. "I suppose I should have expected no less from a Holy Knight."

"Huh?" Ein asked. "Aren't Heavenly Knights the strongest?"

Dill shook his head. "Being a Heavenly Knight comes with some fairly self-destructive caveats. Perhaps you can ask my father about it."

"All right, then."

As Ein vowed to reach out to Lloyd with his questions, a smiling Warren was giving a gentle round of applause.

"My heart danced with joy upon witnessing your splendid triumph," Warren calmly said. "Now then, I think it's best if we return to our ship." He turned to Prince Amur. "Perhaps we should call it a day. What do you think?"

"I-Indeed, I agree," Amur replied. "Prince Ein's guard is still young, but his skills are superb."

The Euroan prince was so shocked by Glint's swift defeat that he hadn't the time to consider other matters. Warren, however, chose to leave a parting gift.

"Ah, Sir Tiggerle," Warren said. "There's something about Lady Krone that had slipped my mind."

"Huh?! So you *do* know something about her, don't you?!" Tiggerle accused. The boy was no longer preoccupied with being called "sir." He just wanted to get hands on some information, even if it was just a sliver. "Out with it! Tell me what you know!"

"I suppose my age is getting to me... I've forgotten something important about her. I know her so well, yet I feel terrible for my forgetfulness."

"You...know her 'well'?"

"I shall draft the details later today and send the documents over to you. Is that all right with you?"

“Yes! Of course!”

“Very well, I shall send a messenger at that time.”

The chancellor curtly bowed to Tiggie before returning to the *White King* with his fellow Ishtaricans. Heim’s third prince cracked a smug, satisfied smile as they walked away.

“Warren, what are you going to tell the third prince?” Ein asked.

“Let’s see...” the chancellor replied. “I shall tell him that she’s an important member of Ishtarican society...and that she knows you *quite well*, Sir Ein. I believe that will suffice.”

“Uh... I hope you’ll cut the third prince and me some slack.”

Chris and Dill chuckled as the rest of the Knights Guard also took in the wholesome sight. While they returned to the boat, Heim’s royalty spent the night in Amur’s castle. Later on in the evening, one of Warren’s messengers provided Tiggie with the report. The messenger reported back that the third prince had initially doubted what he read before scanning over the document once more. Once he was done, the boy screamed, “Impossible! It can’t be!” Heim’s prince had then proceeded to ball up the piece of paper in his hands and bellow, “Don’t mess with me!”

A few days had already passed since Ein set sail for Euro. Olivia and Krone were enjoying a spot of morning tea, the sun rising over the pair as they sat in the castle’s courtyard. Martha suddenly appeared before them with documents in hand.

“Pardon me,” Martha said. “I’ve brought mail from Euro: letters from Sir Ein and a report drafted by Sir Warren. Would you like to peruse them?”

The pair of lovely ladies were so worried about Ein that they swiped the documents from Martha without a moment’s hesitation.

“If you require anything else, please let me know,” Martha said.

“Thank you, Martha,” Olivia replied.

Ein had apparently drafted separate letters for Krone and his mother. As each lady grabbed their own letter, the pair had taken additional care to open the envelope containing Warren’s report. After scanning over the details of the report, Olivia had a forced smile on her face.

“Krone,” Olivia said. “What kind of person is Heim’s third prince? I don’t believe I ever had the chance to meet him while I was there.”

“He’s the type that will never challenge the values he’s been raised with. Once he latches on to a goal, he won’t give up until he gets his way,” Krone replied.

“In other words...he can be quite persistent, correct?”

“I-I suppose. If you were to describe him with a single word,

‘persistent’ would be quite fitting.”

Olivia stayed silent as she reached for her cup of tea. The second princess took a single sip of tea, then another in order to calm herself; she could sympathize with Krone’s experiences living in Heim.

“It even states here that he plans to make you into a consort,” Olivia said.

“The royal family’s words are as good as law in Heim. If the chancellor’s report is to be believed, there’s no doubt in my mind that my fate would’ve been as such,” Krone replied.

“O-Oh dear...”

“Lady Olivia, it appears that Sir Warren has been quite rough with those from Heim.”

Olivia giggled. “Since my beloved Ishtarica no longer carries any ties to them and their kingdom, I don’t particularly mind it.”

It was only then that Krone realized that while Olivia generally wasn’t one to hate or dislike others, she would display great apathy towards those she deemed insignificant. Such was the case with Heim: the second princess saw these people to be akin to meaningless ants crawling on the side of the road. It made no difference to her if one of those ants happened to be a former family member, like Glint for instance.

“Besides, I find it quite rude,” Olivia said. “The third prince is trying to steal a lady already set to marry into another household. Oh, I believe that he tried to woo you first, but you declined. I suppose that makes it invalid.”

“Um, Lady Olivia?” Krone asked.

“Not to worry, Krone. As long as you like Ein, that’s all that matters.”

Krone’s cheeks turned red as Olivia’s words hit her ears.

“Oh my, are you feeling a touch embarrassed?” Olivia asked. Krone gave a silent nod as she hid her eyes with her bangs, further attesting to the girl’s embarrassment. “Now, why don’t we have another cup of tea?”

Back in Euro, Tiggie’s unexpected encounter with Ishtarica’s royalty had prompted their Knights Guard to form a wall around the colossal nation’s authority figures. Going into the second day of his visit, Heim’s third prince wasn’t allowed anywhere near the Ishtaricans.

While he had no days off during his stint as his nation’s proxy, Ein could pop out for a break every so often. With Chris in tow, the crown prince took a stroll into Euro’s castle town. Unlike those in Ishtarica and Heim, the Euroan streets appeared to be shrouded in a blanket of

gray mist. Most of the town's architecture was constructed of carved stone, topped off with bricks on every roof. From a passing glance, most could tell that these buildings were made of robust materials—they had to be. If they were built with wood, the strong ocean winds would make quick work of the entire town. Stepping back to enjoy the foreign scenery, Ein stood in place with his arms crossed.

"Seems like the ocean wind is hindering their agricultural industry," he said.

"Sir Ein?" Chris asked. "What's wrong?"

"I thought that I could get a feeling for what this nation lacked if I walked through its castle town."

"What this nation lacked?"

"Yep. Euro has arable land away from the coast, but it's quite small when compared to that of other countries," Ein replied, nodding while Chris stared at him in confusion. "This is why they depend on the importation of agricultural goods."

"S-Sir Ein?"

"Oh, sorry. I had just thought up the perfect plan of revenge."

The crown prince suddenly crouched down and motioned for his knight to do the same. He placed his finger onto the sand-covered ground.

"I did a bit of studying on this topic while I was still at Roundheart Manor," Ein started. "Heim is a large kingdom with plenty of arable land. Most of their harvested crops are exported throughout the continent; however, that depends on their current relations with the other nations. Lucky for them, political tensions have been quite calm as of late, so most of their exports pass through the merchant city of Bardland."

Using his finger, Ein drew a map in the sand, starting with Heim in the south and ending with Bardland in the continent's center.

"If you look off to the northeast, you'll find the Republic of Rockdam. They import Heim's goods, as does Euro," Ein explained.

"Indeed," Chris agreed.

"This morning I had Warren ask the Euroans about what they import from Heim. The lion's share of it is wheat, which just happens to be the kingdom's most produced crop. Heim knows this and is taking full advantage of it, selling their wheat off at exorbitant prices." Ein gave a malicious smirk, clearly indicating that he was up to something. "Didn't I mention how I wanted you to 'endure all this for now,' right?"

"You're talking about our initial confrontation with those from Heim, aren't you? When you tried to calm me down."

"Yep."

"Are you planning on selling wheat to Euro instead?"

Ein shook his head. “Warren asked me the same question this morning, but I don’t want to just *sell* wheat. I want to sell them *three times* the amount that Euro consumes annually. Luckily, Ishtarica’s production surplus has been steadily growing each year.”

“Uhhh...” Chris was still confused. Why would the crown prince want to sell off three times the amount of necessary wheat?

“If Euro has an excess, they can just sell it off for much cheaper than Heim would. If they did that, even Rockdam would stop buying from Heim at some point. We’ll receive a small commission from the sales and continue to strengthen our relationship with Euro in the process.”

With a levelheaded expression on his face, Ein’s proposal was anything but petty. It would be a powerful move that would cripple Heim’s economy—stealing two of the kingdom’s important business partners.

“At least that was my initial plan, but I’m starting to feel a bit bad about it,” Ein said. “Warren seemed a bit concerned when I informed him of the idea.”

“I agree with him,” Chris replied. “Most of Heim’s wheat farmers would be put out of business.”

“That’s right. I don’t want innocent people to suffer just because they’re from Heim. So, I nixed that idea.”

“I think that’s for the best. What terms did you settle for when all was said and done?”

“Ultimately, we’ve decided to only export goods that Euro is in need of.”

“Isn’t that what I said to begin with? You shook your head though.”

“Oh, I just wanted to share my initial scheme with you.” Ein gave a mischievous grin.

Chris sighed. “Putting your usual antics aside, I think it’s a very good idea. It’ll help in strengthening our ties with Euro, and I’m sure their citizens will be overjoyed.”

“Mhm. I hope this makes wheat a little more affordable for the Euroans.”

The crown prince’s display of compassion was quite in line with his overall character, a fact that Chris couldn’t help but smile at.

A few days after his stroll into the castle town, Ein’s last day as the king’s proxy had arrived. The shouting of dockworkers could be heard echoing throughout the principality’s port.

“That’s it! Lift it up with care!”

A crane attached to one of Ishtarica’s ships was slowly lifting something out of the ocean—the large chunk of sea crystal that Amur had mentioned on the first day of Ein’s visit. Wrapped in chains, the

crystal was carefully raised from the ocean floor.

Even Warren let out a murmur of admiration as he saw the sea crystal emerge, surrounded by the bubbling of white sea foam.

“Sir Warren,” Prince Amur said. “I heard that you shall be departing for Ishtarica this evening.”

“Prince Amur,” Warren replied. “I apologize for our hasty visit.”

“Not at all. I’m elated to know that we’ve had a productive series of meetings.”

The pair of aristocrats seemed satisfied with the results of this trip, and Warren proceeded to take out a letter from his chest pocket.

“This is a letter from our king,” the chancellor said. “He approves of Sir Ein’s proposal and agrees to the exportation of wheat from Ishtarica to Euro. Price can be discussed at a later date, but I assure you that it will be a *reasonable* one. A price much cheaper than whatever Heim currently offers.”

There was a beat of silence before the prince spoke once more.

“Are you sure about this? We’re very grateful, but...”

“Of course. We have a wheat surplus, and we were originally planning to export a wide variety of crops to Heim. We hoped those goods would be sold to friendly nations at reasonable prices, however...”

Ishtarica and Heim had cut all friendly ties.

“Even I was shocked when I heard Sir Ein’s original idea,” Warren confessed.

“As was I,” Amur agreed. “He watches on quietly, but it seems that your crown prince bares quite a set of fangs. It’s a surprising thing to behold.”

“Should there be some sort of complication between our nation and Heim, it might be a hand worth playing.”

Warren gave a kind smile, but Amur felt a shiver up his spine. The chancellor seemed to be joking at a glance, but it was clear that he’d do whatever was necessary if push came to shove.

“But I’m worried that Heim may consider making a move against Ishtarica,” Amur said.

“Oh? What do you mean?” Warren asked.

“The kingdom seems to believe that there wouldn’t be any issues if they refrained from launching the first strike against you.”

“Why don’t I let you in on a little tidbit,” Warren said, his gaze exuding the sharp but fearsome aura of a well-polished blade. “A ‘first strike’ means different things to different parties. For instance, many from our aristocracy have deemed the Roundheart’s actions to be the launching of a preemptive strike. Should they make any more erratic movements, I guarantee that His Majesty, our king, may consider changing his mind.”

“I see. That makes sense.”

Amur gave a solemn nod, overpowered by Warren’s aura. As the chancellor, Warren was Ishtarica’s top civil servant. Euro’s prince had suddenly realized that the nation he was newly allied to was not only bolstered by an impressive military, but by personnel who wielded terrifying power.

“By the way, Prince Amur,” Warren said. “I see that Sir Edward isn’t by your side.”

“Ah, he’s a very devout believer in his faith. Every morning, he requires a bit of time to offer up a prayer to his deity,” Prince Amur explained. “I ensure that he’s undisturbed during his morning routine.”

“That’s wonderful.”

While a few dreary topics were touched upon, the two spoke more of business ventures as they deepened the bonds between their nations. Satisfied with how productive the visit had been, Warren was genuinely pleased.

As the sun set and Euro’s skies turned dark, the Ishtarican fleet prepared for their scheduled departure. Edward quickly made his way to one of the ships’ ramps and handed a box to the knight posted nearby.

“These are souvenirs,” Edward explained. “This wooden box contains some of Euro’s local specialities.”

“Duly noted. I shall relay the message to His Highness and the chancellor,” the knight replied as Edward placed a large, wooden box at his feet. In an exercise of caution, the knight opened the lid in order to confirm the box’s contents. “Please excuse me, but I must check what’s inside... Oh my, this is a wonderful spread of goods.”

Inside the box lay many items, including a variety of handicrafts and jewelry.

“Ah, and how are Heim’s people faring?” the knight asked.

“They’re quietly staying within our castle,” Edward replied. “I suppose they fear the Ishtarican Knights Guard, or they’re choosing to remain silent following the defeat of their Holy Knight...”

“I see. Very well.”

The knight nodded while Edward smiled in return. A few moments later, the knight reached into the wooden box.

“Pardon me, does this represent something? It looks to be carved out of wood,” the knight said.

“It’s the deity I pray to,” Edward explained. “It’s considered to be one of the continent’s guardian angels, supposedly modeled after a certain species of creature. If you could please give this to His

Highness Prince Ein, I'm sure he'd receive their protection."

"Hm, I'm quite ignorant in such matters. What species is this supposed to be?"

"It's called a scarlet fox. It's said to be..." Edward prattled on with a carefree smile.

The knight brought the souvenirs onto the ship, taking care to carefully place the scarlet fox figurine in Ein's room.

"A guardian angel, huh," Ein said as he stared at the figurine set on the table.

With the knight's exit, only Warren, Chris, and Ein were left in the room. The chancellor had a stern expression on his face as his gaze narrowed in on the figurine.

At the same time, Ein furrowed his brows in displeasure. "Warren," he said. The sudden and forceful nature of the boy's call caused his compatriots to gasp.

"Y-Yes, what is it?" Warren replied.

"Do you remember what that knight just said before leaving the room?"

"Of course. Scarlet foxes bring good fortune and protect people from misfortune. Hence, those born with red hair are said to be born with blessings, or at least Sir Edward claimed as much."

They were supposed to be leaving already—the steam whistle of the ship had sounded and the ship had set sail after a slight jolt of movement.

"Sir Ein and Chris, I'd like your opinions," Warren started.

"Yessir," Chris said. "This figurine is—"

"This figurine is of the red fox," Ein interjected. "Without a doubt."

"Indeed, I feel the same," Warren replied.

The two adults were perplexed by the crown prince's erratic behavior, but they decided to keep quiet and continue watching him. Chris couldn't help but wonder why the scarlet fox was in Euro of all places.

"If we were to believe that the red fox caused the Demon Lord to go berserk, just why would the species cross the ocean?" Chris asked.

"Hm... The texts mentioned that those foxes were a hedonistic species," Warren murmured.

Ein lowered his voice. "What are you trying to say, Warren?"

"I have a hunch, one that tells me that the red foxes are planning something on this continent."

The chancellor had fallen silent, choosing to cross his arms and pensively stroke his beard for a spell. The Demon Lord's rampage was the most destructive calamity in Ishtarica's history. Warren and Chris didn't completely trust the ancient Elven tome, but they couldn't

easily ignore it either.

“Heh... Ha ha ha,” Ein suddenly started to laugh. “Indeed. That thing always played with its opponents. Hence, I was incorrect. I was wrong to have trusted and accepted that vixen.”

“S-Sir Ein?!” Chris yelped as she started to shudder.

The boy was simply seated next to her, but the marshal feared her head would go flying the very moment she took her eyes off him. Warren widened his eyes; he realized that Ein’s manner of speech was now completely different from before.

“Sir Ein, what are you suddenly...” Warren started.

“That’s right! What’s gotten into you all of a sudden?!” Chris accused.

What did he believe? What did he accept? These words remained a mystery as Ein threw his head into his hands.

“I simply thought that she was lonely!” Ein exclaimed. “But I was wrong! She was planning on toying with us from the start! Ever since that day!”

With the figurine in hand, Ein stood up and made his way to the window. A confused Chris tried to reach out in an attempt to stop him, but her legs wouldn’t move. The marshal stared down at her feet, stunned.

“Why?! How?!” she gasped.

No restraining spell or any kind of magic had been cast upon her. While looking at her legs trembling like those of a newborn fawn, Chris realized that she was terrified of her prince.

“That woman only joined us to tear us apart!” Ein cried, lifting his right arm into the air.

He swung as though he held a greatsword. Chris could only stare, perplexed before she let out a gasp of shock. A jet-black handguard appeared on Ein’s right hand before it proceeded to envelop the rest of his arm. The prince had summoned this glistening, jet-black armor alongside a massive greatsword; all eyes in the room were now on him.

“Raaaaah!” Ein bellowed. The level of fury and murderous intent emanating from the boy prompted the entire room to shudder.

A nearby window pane had cracked due to the sound of his voice. Ein threw the figurine into the air and roared as he crashed his greatsword into the floor. With an earthquake-like rumble and the sound of iron being split in two, the room was filled by a cacophony of furniture being blown apart.

“Hah... Hah...” Ein panted.

As the blade made its way down, Chris and Warren witnessed what could be easily described as the aftermath of a deadly battle. There was no ship sturdier than the *White King*, but its hull had been

blown right through. Portions of the mighty vessel's deck and artillery were completely destroyed, all from a single swing of Ein's blade.

"Sir Ein! How did you—" Chris called before she stopped herself. "Sir Ein?! Sir Ein!"

Upon seeing the crown prince immediately fall, Chris rushed to his side. The fear she felt earlier had completely subsided, but her heart was now filled only with worry for the fallen prince.

The *White King* was Ishtarica's preeminent warship, the king's mighty vessel that could match a dragon's strength. Despite all that was said about the boat, a single swipe from Ein's blade had wiped out one of its sides.

Warren gulped. "That greatsword belongs to... N-No, before that, we must..."

This situation had to be handled. Warren looked at the members of the Knights Guard flooding into the room before letting out a sigh.

"It seems that we won't be able to keep this to ourselves," Chris muttered.

As the *White King* docked at Ishtarica's port, Ein's consciousness showed no signs of returning. Even after being rushed to the castle infirmary, he lay motionless with time only passing in the days that followed.

Chapter Three: Preparing for a Trip and Turning into a Monster

When Ein awoke, he felt a pleasant spring breeze blow upon him before he realized he was in the middle of a grassy field. He was quite comfortable, resting on something that had about the same softness as a pillow. The only problem with this cozy situation was that Ein had no idea where he was. He attempted to stand up, but was unable to as he had seemingly lost control over his body. It was as if he were in a dream, one where he couldn't open his eyes, yet he had a solid grasp on his surroundings. The sky above the prince was a deep blue while the grassy plains below him seemed to go on for as far as the eye could see.

The whooshing sounds of the wind made it a bit difficult to hear, but Ein could faintly make out that someone was humming a tune from above. Like a bell, a woman's voice rang out into the air as the boy realized he was resting on her lap.

The woman gently caressed the crown prince's sleeping face.

"All right. This should be good enough," she said.

Good enough for what? was the question Ein wanted to ask, but he couldn't vocalize his thoughts.

Still, she nodded back. "I'm talking about you. You should be fine now. I'm sorry for causing you so much trouble."

About me? Causing me trouble? What are you talking about?

As Ein thought to himself, the woman slightly frowned as she continued to caress his face.

"Off you go. There's nothing for you to worry about. I'll do something about him next time."

The woman never provided Ein with a clear answer, but he suddenly regained the ability to move. He opened his eyes and tried to turn towards her; he had questions about who she was and where they were.

"W-Wait!" Ein called out.

However, the world around him quickly faded to white in a fuzzy haze. At the same time, the bright lights surrounding the woman made it impossible for Ein to make out her face. He reached out for her, but the woman only continued to fade away.

“Who are...” Ein gasped as he opened his eyes. “Huh?”

He was no longer lying in a grassy field under a deep blue sky, but rather, in his bed in White Night Castle. He tried to process everything that had just happened to him. *Calm down. Why am I here? Where was that grassy field? I went to Euro as a proxy, and then as I was returning home... Wait, returning home?* He remembered watching a large sea crystal chunk being hauled away before they left Euro, but he couldn’t recall anything after that.

“Is it nighttime?” he wondered aloud. As he gazed outside, Ein noticed the dark skies enveloping the royal capital. “Huh? What’s this?”

He gazed down at his right arm, noticing that it was covered in bandages—ones used to seal powers away. The wrappings were from Katima’s lab and probably crafted by someone with sealing skills comparable to those of Majorica’s. Ein couldn’t understand why such a thing had been wrapped around his arm.

“Hm, well, whatever,” he mumbled. He didn’t feel any pain or discomfort in his arm, so he ripped the bandages off. “Well then, guess I’ll have to ask around.”

He reached for the bell on his bedside table and rang it. “I’m too young to be this forgetful. Here’s hoping I’m just exhausted.”

He’d gone to a foreign country as the king’s proxy, after all. In an odd twist of fate, he’d even run into his little brother before finding himself embroiled in a troublesome quarrel with Heim’s royal family. Ein’s body and mind were completely exhausted, so he didn’t think much about the ruckus coming from outside his room. The door opened as Martha and Chris gingerly entered.

“S-Sir...Ein?” Chris asked carefully. The marshal had both hands over her mouth as her damp eyes widened.

“Chris. I don’t remember much about the voyage home, but when did we arrive at the castle?” Ein asked.

“Sir Ein!”

“Huh?! Hey... Wh-What’s going on, Chris?”

Large beads of tears rolled down her cheeks as she hugged Ein. The crown prince was frozen in place, bewildered by his marshal’s actions.

“Sir Ein, how are you feeling?” Martha asked, looking equally stunned. From the hesitation she spoke with, it was easy to see that the servant was at a loss for words.

“I’m just a little tired,” Ein answered. “I can’t put any strength in my limbs.”

“I understand. Lady Chris, I shall fetch His Majesty and the others.”

“Y-Yes, please!” Chris cried through her sobs.

Martha quickly scurried out of the room and Ein tilted his head in response. The boy was dumbfounded by the situation he was in; he hadn't had people sobbing over him with such heartfelt tears the last time he woke up.

"Chris, what's going on? Why are you crying?" Ein asked.

"B-Because... Sir Ein! Oh, Sir Ein!" Chris wailed.

"H-Huh?"

The crown prince was a bit embarrassed to find himself soothing a beautiful older woman such as Chris. As the marshal sobbed into his chest, Ein gently patted her head as though he were comforting a small child.

A moment later, Martha scrambled back to the room with Olivia, Silverd, and Lalalua right behind her.

Judging by the copious tears that welled up in her eyes, Olivia seemed to be more shocked even than the marshal. "E-Ein! You've finally awoken!"

Mother's also... Ein knew that something was off.

"I don't remember seeing you when I returned, mother," Ein said. "I've fulfilled my duty as the king's proxy and now I'm home."

At the moment those words left his lips, his weeping mother rushed to his side. Silverd gently put his arm around Lalalua while she was wiping her own tears away. He then proceeded to approach Ein's bed.

"Ein," the king started.

"I apologize for how forward this sounds, but could you please tell me what's going on, grandfather?"

"Most certainly. However, I'd be lying if I said I wasn't overjoyed to hear your voice once again. It's been a while. I'll be able to provide an explanation once Katima arrives. She should be here any moment."

A while? Something had definitely happened while Ein was out cold and he was eager to get an answer or two. Just a few moments later, the pajama-clad Katima entered the room; her "person in a cat suit" appearance was a humorous sight despite the tense atmosphere that hung over the prince's quarters.

"Katima, I'm not quite sure about that outfit," Ein remarked.

"And that's the furrst thing you have to say to me after waking up? Good grief, you troublemeowker. Now, I need Olivia and Chris to mewve."

The Cait-Sith forcibly pushed the two ladies aside.

"S-Sister! You mustn't be so violent!" Olivia begrudgingly wailed to Katima.

"U-Ugh..." Chris said. The sad gaze she gave Ein made her look like a recently abandoned kitten.

Katima didn't budge at these two contrasting women. "Can mew

walk?”

“Of course I— Huh?” Ein tried to get up from his bed, but he couldn’t put any strength into his arms. His body wouldn’t listen to him, leading him to practically roll off the bed.

Katima quickly provided her support. “It is what it is. Seems like mew need some rehabilitation.”

“R-Rehabilitation?”

“But of course. This pair of sobbing ladies waited on mew hand and foot while continuing to care for you. Krone isn’t here at the meowment, but she’s been visiting you every morning.” She let out a loud sigh before continuing. “It’s been six months; mew’ve been lying in bed for six months following the incident that occurred on your way home from Euro.” Katima looked on wistfully. “Actually, mew’re almost in your fourth year at the academy now.”

Ein was taken off guard by this revelation, desperately fighting back the urge to mutter, “You’re kidding.” As he glanced around at the worried faces that surrounded him, he quickly understood that no one was joking.

“Father, I’d like to talk with mew in the morning so we can touch on the contents of *that* book as well,” Katima said. “Would that be all right with mew?”

“Certainly,” Silverd agreed. “I think that would be for the best. Olivia, Chris, come on. Ein has only just awoken, and we wouldn’t want all the sobbing to take a toll on him at this very moment, yes? Follow my orders for now and please try to keep yourselves together.”

With Silverd and Lalalua’s encouragement, the group had taken their leave. Katima was the last to exit, leaving Ein alone to think back on his time in Euro.

“I don’t remember a single thing after seeing those souvenirs...” he mumbled.

Ein had been feeling weird since then, but he didn’t want to think about those gifts at the present moment. If he got wrapped up in his thoughts while he was alone, he didn’t know what he’d do. He glanced at his body, hoping to take his mind away from his worries. He could feel the odd sensation of his body growing in real time. Ein was still a growing boy, and he’d grown a great deal over the past six months. While taking a bit of joy in his growth spurt, the prince looked at the brightening sky outside his window.

The following morning, Martha arrived to pick up Ein. She was pushing along a magical tool crafted to assist those unable to use their legs—or more simply put, a magic-stone-powered wheelchair. Ein situated himself in the chair and the pair left his room for another part of the castle. They approached a door beside the audience room and were soon greeted by a party much smaller than the one that had

visited Ein the night before. In fact, only Chris and Silverd were in attendance.

“Warren and Lloyd will arrive soon,” Silverd said. “Ah, yes. Katima is on her way as well. She just might be able to find an answer or two in regards to something she’s noticed within you.”

With that, the king fell silent as Martha took her leave. The silence continued for several minutes until Warren and Lloyd arrived. Upon entering the room, the two men brightly talked to Ein as though they were trying to raise the prince’s spirits.

“Sir Ein, it certainly has been a while,” Warren said. “You’ve grown quite a bit. Why don’t you ask Sir Lloyd to tailor a new set of clothes for you?”

“While I do have my Needlework skill, I hope you don’t come to me for any clothes,” Lloyd sheepishly replied.

“Ah, it seems he’s quite embarrassed. I suppose I shall leave it at that for now.”

Katima arrived a few moments later and Warren traded glances with the king.

“Now, why don’t we enter that room?” the king suggested.

Lloyd proceeded to open the door to the audience room—the silence that greeted them implied that no one was inside. The only presence to be found within was the Demon Lord’s magic stone, solemnly resting in its ornate display.

“I shall wheel you inside, Sir Ein,” Chris said as she pushed the wheelchair. “H-Huh?”

Upon setting foot in the audience room, Chris let out a cry of confusion.

“What’s wrong?” Ein asked.

“N-Nothing. My body just feels heavy all of a sudden.”

She clearly felt that something was off, but the marshal tried to shrug it off as just her imagination. She continued to wheel Ein inside the room.

“You sure? All right, then,” Ein said.

However, the marshal’s gut told her this ominous feeling was anything but “all right.” Silverd and the others had walked up to the throne, but Ein’s wheelchair was stopped, as though he was blocked by an invisible wall.

“You can’t mewve forward, can you, Chris?” Katima asked.

“Correct. It’s like I’m walking into a wall,” Chris admitted.

“I’d like to confurrm one more thing. Try to brute force your way through.”

Ein had no idea what Katima was trying to check, but he remained seated as Chris tried to push the wheelchair through. As the marshal exerted her strength in hopes of moving forward, a young

girl's voice suddenly echoed throughout the room.

"Stay away... Stay away..."

Her icy tone chilled everyone's heart to the core before an overwhelming, frosty aura blanketed the room. Silverd and Lloyd appeared to be alarmed while Warren's expression turned sorrowful.

"Take Ein away from the throne! Hurry!" Katima hastily called out.

"R-Right!" The marshal rushed him out right away, causing the chilly aura to dissipate.

"Katima, it seems the results of your six-month-long research are unfortunately correct," Silverd said while gazing at the Demon Lord's stone.

Even Katima looked grief-stricken. "How unfortunate this is. I wouldn't have dreamed of so many odd strings of fate intertwining around a single purrson."

Without another word, she handed Ein a book. The crown prince was confused by all of this all, but he glanced at the book. It was clear that this tome had been written recently, with Katima von Ishtarica and Christina Wernstein listed as its authors. The book's title: *The Tragedy of the Demon Lord*.

"I'm sure mew have a lot of questions, but I want you to skim through this book furrst."

"Okay, then I'll do that," Ein agreed.

Pressured by the atmosphere of the audience room around him, the crown prince read through the book. The spine of the leatherbound book felt new to the touch, with not much additional age to be seen on its pages.

"You and Chris wrote this?" Ein asked Katima.

"That's right," the Cait-Sith replied. "After six months of painstaking research, we were finally able to compile this book. I couldn't even put a purrice on it."

"Got it."

Ein placed the book on his lap and started to flip through its pages.

This book serves as an analysis of Demon Lord Arshay, the Nightmare of Envy, before she was slain by Ishtarica's first king. Her foreboding nickname was apparently coined by those who crossed blades with her in battle.

The Demon Lord possessed an immense well of magical power that made her capable of wreaking absolute destruction; an unique trait among most monsters. When one thinks back to the war a few centuries ago, no further explanation is needed to demonstrate just

how much of a threat she posed to the nation's security.

Demon Lord Arshay seemed to keep to herself, with records stating that she was still too immature to take the throne. Despite that, she had two loyal allies whom she called family: the Dullahan and the Elder Lich. The nation of monsters had been established when this trio initially crossed paths. From there, they went on a journey to extend their hands to many monsters and those we now refer to as "nonhuman species."

Arshay wasn't born a queen, but there were signs that she had grown into one through her actions, specifically when the trio went on to form a large settlement of their own after saving many lives.

It's said that she suddenly came down with a terrible fever and slumbered for days. Several days later, she awoke as though nothing was wrong.

Records additionally indicate that many of those around her were terrified by the sheer might that she appeared to command following her slumber. In fact, it was said that she now had a frightening aura about her. Those spared by the trio found the dramatic increase in the Demon Lord's power to be a joyous event. Over time, the small settlement grew into a large town, and eventually became a kingdom with Arshay as its queen. It was likely to be the ideal sanctuary for those who couldn't mingle with normal humans.

However, the situation rapidly changed within a few years. A peculiar incident led the kingdom to its ruination. It's said that the arrival of the red foxes was to blame. Soon after they appeared, the congenial species immediately integrated themselves into the kingdom's society, establishing close-knit relationships with the rest of the community. The foxes' chief appeared to be rather competent, as traces remain of her contributions to the kingdom.

It seemed only natural that the fox chief was allowed to take a place in the Demon Lord's inner circle, but Arshay's behavior soon turned erratic after the red fox had joined their ranks.

It was around this time that the Demon Lord pushed away her greatest allies, the Dullahan and the Elder Lich, by dispatching the pair to faraway villages. While they were away, only the red fox chief remained at her side. Arshay's mental state continued to deteriorate from there, as she indulged in worldly desires before completely losing control. She became so envious of others that her jealousy-filled comments eventually reached human ears—ears belonging to those who started calling her the "Nightmare of Envy."

The Dullahan and the Elder Lich eventually went against their orders in hopes of returning to Arshay's side. However, other records indicate that reunion never happened—the Demon Lord Arshay met her demise at the hands of Ishtarica's first king.

Ever since, there's been no trace of the red fox species to be seen. The foxes didn't write their names into Ishtarica's history books, and only left behind faint but rare indications that they once called this country home.

Through researching this information, it seems clear that the red fox chief had exerted some sort of influence over the Demon Lord. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to claim that the species holds the secret behind Arshay's campaign against humanity.

Once Ein had scanned through the important bits, he closed the book.

"So you're saying that this hypothesis of yours has been proved true?" the crown prince asked.

"Indeed," Katima replied. "The red fox chief placed a curse on the Demon Lord, causing the latter to go berserk in a rampage that is still spoken of to this day. The book in your hands was incomplete, but your earlier incident in this room has purroved my hypothesis."

Arshay's magic stone had repelled Ein, leading Katima to claim that the combined powers of the Dullahan and the Elder Lich within him were most likely the cause. The Demon Lord's will still resided within her stone—a will that regretted her actions prior to her death so much that she made a sorrowful plea for Ein to stay back.

"Why is the stone reacting now?" Ein asked. "I stepped into this room right before I set sail for Euro."

"I know. I've got a few ideas, but there's something I must say before that," Katima said, fixing her posture. "Right before mew left Euro, mew forcibly used the Dullahan's power in ways mew shouldn't have been able to and ripped a hole in our nation's toughest ship."

"Right."

"The likely cause for your six-month coma was your body requiring rest and its need to shut itself down to do so."

"Sir Ein," Chris chimed in. "When you fell to the ground, I checked your stamina and magical power to monitor your health. Your magical power was completely depleted and your stamina was almost gone."

"Chris speaks the truth...and mew see..." Katima said, rummaging through her lab coat before she fished out Ein's status card. "I apologize for looking over this without your purrmission, but it was a rather dire situation."

She handed Ein his status card and encouraged him to glance at it.

[Stamina] 4055
[Magical Power] —
[Attack] 473
[Defens■] 952
[Agility] 395
[■kills] Dark Knight, Grand Sorcery, Ocean Current,
Thick Fog, Toxin Decomposition EX, Absorb, Gift of
Training

His status card seemed to have some sort of bug. Ein fought back against the impulse to point it out and opted to quietly stare at the card. Letters seemed to be missing and his magical power was represented by a sole line.

“It’s like I’ve become a monster,” Ein murmured.

“Like one?” Katima asked. “To be furrank, it’s hard for me to say that what happened to you *isn’t* related to the Demon Lord going berserk.”

Ein thought back to the grassy field and the woman who’d accompanied him there. *That must’ve been the Elder Lich apologizing for her husband’s actions. If they were really trying to take over my body, there wouldn’t have been any apologies or promises made afterwards.* It was crystal clear to the boy that the married couple viewed the red fox chief as their mortal enemy.

“Phew,” Ein said with an exhale. “Warren, do you think Euro was trying to lure me into a trap?”

“I believe it was just a coincidence. They had no reason to deceive us that day or create any kind of rift between our nations,” Warren replied.

Even if Euro were aiming for Ein, it would have required quite a bit of ingenuity and many assumptions in place. It simply seemed unfeasible for Euro to have done so.

“Sir Ein, we’re faced with two issues,” Warren said calmly. “I’d like for us all to be on the same page. First, and of the utmost priority, is your health.”

“Oh, so it’s not the red foxes,” Ein replied.

“That is our second issue. However, we have no clue as to what the foxes’ motives may be, and speaking bluntly, there’s no guarantee that they pose a threat to Ishtarica, especially when one considers that they most likely reside on the other side of the ocean. We’ll be prepared if they do bare their fangs against us, but it’s currently too soon to tell. First and foremost, we should see to it that your health and safety takes priority.”

Ein gave a silent nod in response to Warren’s firm words.

“For the time being, let us operate under the assumption that

you're now a monster," the chancellor said.

"You're referring to my listed job along with my current paralysis, right?" Ein asked.

"Precisely; this is quite an unprecedented development. I believe that we should proceed with caution, taking care to conduct our further research by the book. We need to ensure that we never have another boat incident on our hands."

"Right... I agree with that."

"I appreciate your understanding. We wouldn't want you to fall into another six-month-long coma, or worse. We can't be sure it wouldn't happen again either. It only attests to the Dullahan's frightening power."

From a practical standpoint, it was best to avoid situations that would cause the crown prince to fall into another deep slumber.

"But we don't plan on ignoring the red foxes either," Warren added.

"You're planning to research them, right?" Ein asked.

"Of course. I shall be providing additional orders to our spies in Heim. If they find anything of interest, they're to report back immediately. Meanwhile, we'll be looking into any leads we can find within our borders." The chancellor stroked his beard; these appeared to be temporary measures. "But our first priority is to have a round of tests run on your body. This would require you to do some traveling, Sir Ein. You'd likely have to make your way to another city, with the expertise of researchers and adventurers alike showing you the way."

"I understand. It's my body, after all. I would want to be properly checked out for any abnormalities," Ein obediently said before he turned to Silverd. "Grandfather, I apologize for causing so much trouble."

"No need for you to apologize. We're just worried about you," the king replied.

"Thank you. I'd like to look into my monsterification first, so I may need to take some more time off from the academy."

"That's fine; it can't be helped. However, Warren, I believe Kaizer said something about the academy..."

A month had passed since Ein had awoken and spring was hot on Ishtarica's heels. The season was typically quite busy as most students were preparing to advance to the next grade, but things were much more hectic this year. Ein had been finally able to take his long-deferred exam and ensure his status as a First. It had also been a while since he had spoken with his friends, but their attention was quickly taken by the prince's wheelchair. When asked about it, Ein had told

them that he'd gotten injured while on duty over the past six months. His rehabilitation had recently started, but he was recovering at an astonishing speed. Ein guessed that the Elder Lich must've been quietly assisting him. Now recovered enough to walk by himself, the prince approached the grounds of a certain building.

"Hi Krone," Ein said.

"I think your greeting is a little too casual in this situation," she replied.

The "certain building" the prince stood before was the castle town headquarters of Agustos Trading Firm, Krone's current home. The sights and sounds of Ein's rather casual greeting had left the young lady in disbelief.

Krone had visited the castle when Ein woke up, clinging to him with tears in her eyes, just as Chris and Olivia had. Fast-forward to today, and she had headed home after hearing that Ein was going to be skipping rehab for the day.

"Goodness... I would've tidied my hair up a little more had I known you were coming," Krone grumpily said. Still, she was unable to hide her delight.

With a dry laugh, Ein held her hand. "Hey, why don't we go on a date?"

Krone gave a surprised gasp.

With spring right around the corner, the sun's warm rays were beaming down from the tranquil blue skies above, the perfect day for a date. The couple walked along one of the town's empty streets as they approached one of the port's corners.

"Eep!" Krone gasped. "Don't splash me, all right?"

"Rawr!"

"Rarr!"

The pair stopped by the port to visit the Sea Dragon twins, who had lowered their heads in recognition of Krone's words.

"It's so wholesome," Ein said as he sat on a wooden box on the pier.

"I thought this was a date, Ein," Krone said. "Why are you so far away?"

"It soothes my soul when I see you playing with the Sea Dragons."

"I-I see... But even so, you must pay *some* attention to me."

"I know, my lady."

Both smiled as Ein walked over to Krone.

The Sea Dragons, true to their monstrous nature, were growing at an absurd pace. However, there were a handful of reasons encouraging this growth spurt... Someone was providing the scaly "noodles" with magic stones. From cheap stones that cost around

1,000 G to expensive ones in the ballpark of 50,000 G, the dragons had a more than ample supply of nutrients. Even the person feeding them hadn't expected the pair to grow so fast. "It's much more than what I expected! But I can't stop meow!" Her energetic voice was still fresh in Ein's memory.

"They really have grown," Ein observed.

"Raaawr?"

"Rarr?"

"Their cries are still cute, but they're no longer a cute little pair of tiny dragons," Krone agreed.

El and Al were more than five meters in length. Already quite strong, the pair would hunt for small creatures along the shore and occasionally bring back their materials as souvenirs. Other times they would bring back sea crystals, but no matter the gift, it was always welcome.

"They can swim through the castle's waterways for now, but that'll be a challenge for them soon," Ein remarked.

"Indeed. I suppose as their father, you'll be a little lonely," Krone said. "The castle is close enough, but it does take a little while to make your way here."

"W-Well, it's best if they grow up big and strong."

"They're so attached to you. I'm sure they'll rush to your aid should something happen."

As she giggled, the air of elegance around Krone implied that she was no simple townsgirl. She gave Ein a graceful smile.

"And what's on your mind?" she asked.

"What do you mean?" Ein replied.

Krone was petting the Sea Dragons' heads while her beautiful, light-blue hair fluttered in the wind. She sighed and turned to the crown prince. "Do you really believe I'm so ignorant? I'll get angry." She gave an adorable pout.

"If I were to turn into a monster completely, what would you do?" Ein asked.

"Nothing at all."

"Huh?"

"I said that I'd do nothing. You'd still be you, wouldn't you?"

"Wait! But there's a chance I'd become a monster! I'd be something completely different! You understand what I'm saying, don't you?!"

"I do."

Krone giggled as she gazed at the water's surface. Her shimmering, light-blue locks gave off the young lady's unique flowery fragrance. She pressed her thin, pale fingers towards her mouth, making her seem mature and alluring.

“I won’t push you away just because you became a monster. But if you’re so worried, why don’t I make a promise?” Krone offered as she approached Ein. “If you ever transform into a monster, could you present me with another star crystal? If you do, I don’t think we’ll have any issues.”

She held out her right hand, adorned with a star crystal, so he could clearly see it.

“N-Not an issue? I think that’s a bit too convenient a solution,” Ein replied.

“Not at all. And to me, there wouldn’t be an issue.”

When Ein had first gifted the star crystal to Krone, he hadn’t understood the meaning behind it. But he was well aware of it now, and Krone had implied that it was what she desired.

“But if that’s all it takes, of course, I’ll...” Ein started.

“Ein! ‘All it takes,’ you say?!” Krone said. “Well, that’s all it took for you to bring me here, you know.”

“S-Sorry. I was just a little surprised.”

She giggled at his immediate apology. “I’m kidding. But it’s a promise, all right?”

“I promise. If I ever become a monster I’ll present you with another star crystal.”

Upon hearing those words, Krone happily took Ein’s hand and sat with him on the wooden box.

“You won’t be gone from the capital forever, right?” Krone asked. “When they run those tests on you, that is...”

“Yeah, I think I’ll be able to come back every now and again. Well, depending on the situation,” Ein replied.

She worriedly stroked his hand.

“That’s ticklish,” the crown prince replied.

“Endure it for a little, okay? And is that all you have? Have you told me all your worries? Everything you’ve wanted to say?”

“Hm? Y-Yeah, I guess.”

“Good. Now, how will we spend the rest of today?”

The stunned Ein gave a look of befuddlement.

“Today’s a date, is it not?” Krone asked. “Then will you accompany me to do some shopping?”

“I see. Then I’ll happily come along, my lady.”

She pulled him away from the pier while the twins let out a gentle but lonely cry as they watched the couple leave.

While welcoming new students to its streets, the academy district was bustling with crowds of people. A few days after his date with Krone, Ein had gone to speak with Kaizer. The students were on spring

break, but that wasn't the case for this instructor.

"Huh? I've got no idea what you're on about," Kaizer replied.

"Huh? But aren't you a former adventurer, Instructor Kaizer?" Ein asked.

Slowly becoming more irritated, Kaizer raised his voice. "What I'm asking is, why would the freaking *crown prince* want to visit the guild?!"

"I'm going to be in need of information from adventurers, so I feel like I'll need to stop by the guild on a regular basis," Ein replied.

"And you can't elaborate on this so-called information, I presume?"

Ein gave a solemn nod of agreement.

"Then..." Kaizer started.

"But my grandfather did say that I could tell you, so I can explain if you'd like," Ein interjected with a grin. "Ow!"

It'd been a while since his instructor had bonked Ein in the head.

"I-I know I shouldn't be saying this, but no one usually hits the crown prince, you know!" Ein wailed.

"Rest assured, I've already received permission from His Majesty," Kaizer replied.

"So my family is at the root of all this?! Then I can't win."

Win against what? Kaizer thought to himself. Ein proceeded to give the short version of the events so far, and the instructor became troubled by what he heard—the former adventurer had gotten himself into a mess that was far beyond what he'd imagined.

"You're telling me that the Demon Lord is involved too?" Kaizer asked. "Your health takes priority, of course."

"This is highly confidential information," Ein warned.

"Grandfather stated that he'd provide you with some hush money, so you should treat yourself."

"I'm not too happy with all this though..." With a loud sigh, Kaizer took out a pen and paper from his desk. "I can write a letter of introduction for you. I don't think anyone will treat you too terribly if you're with me."

"Thank you."

"Adventurers work on a merit system. I've been retired for a while, but I'm sure many would obediently provide you with some info if I introduced you... However, I doubt you can use the royal family's name while traveling."

"Correct. I'd have a duty to inform the citizens that funds would be required if I were to do so."

Ein couldn't let this information slip to the public just yet, and thus he had to be slightly undercover.

"Do you think they'd know my identity if I waltzed right in?" the

crown prince asked.

“You’re a hero who defeated the Sea Dragon. Why would you think you *wouldn’t* get found out? Did you not think that far ahead? Go to Majorica. He might have a magical tool or two that could assist you.”

“You know Majorica, sir?”

“Know him? We used to be in the same party.”

Ein was so surprised that he almost tripped. “H-Huh?! You and Majorica were in the same party?”

“Yep. He was the best support around. In fact, in all my years of being an adventurer, I never met anyone better.”

“Was he always...into unique fashion?”

“Don’t ask.”

“Right, okay.” Ein nodded and gave a forced smile. “I’ll visit him tomorrow.”

Popular among adventurers, Majorica’s Magic Stones was a hole-in-the-wall store located just off the castle town’s main street. As the establishment was slightly hidden away, Ein and Chris stopped by in the morning. There appeared to be no customers milling about inside.

“The store’s empty,” Ein said as he stood in front of the shop.

“Your Highness, there’s no need for you to glance around the store,” the dryly smiling Majorica said as he came out from behind his storefront’s door. “My store is actually quite lively in the evening.”

“The evening? Why’s that?”

“Because that’s when all the adventurers come back into town and sell off all the magic stones they’ve found while hunting. Only the wealthy or their servants come to peruse my wares in the morning.” In addition, it was currently a weekday morning and it wasn’t likely that other customers would stop by until later in the day. “Anyways, welcome, you two. Come on in.”

The moment Ein stepped inside, his attention was drawn to a magic stone. As always, Majorica’s store was filled with delicious aromas.

“Now, Sir Ein,” Chris warned. “There’s something we must do first, isn’t there?”

“Oh my, do you perhaps have business with me?” Majorica asked.

Ein nodded.

“Hm, it’s no wonder that something seems to be a bit different about you today, Your Highness. All right then, could you two give me a moment? I’ll close my store for now.” Majorica swiftly closed up and soon returned to Ein’s side. “It’s been quite a while, hasn’t it? Were you perhaps...taking an extended rest due to some sort of change to your body?”

“M-Majorica?” Ein stammered.

The store owner’s sharp gaze pierced right through the boy, implying that nothing slipped past him. It seemed the crown prince couldn’t just nonchalantly play this off.

“Are you truly Your Highness?” Majorica asked. His question quickly chilled the room, as if its atmosphere was that of another world.

“Um... What do you mean?”

“Let me rephrase that. Are you a person or a monster? Whichever could you be?”

“Master Majorica, I believe your comments are rather insolent!” Chris cried as she stood up, banging the counter with her fist.

Indeed, it was a rude thing to say, especially to the crown prince. However, Ein raised his hand in order to stop his gallant knight.

“A lot of things have happened, but I’m a human. Does that answer satisfy you?” Ein asked. He remained calm and collected.

Silence filled the air before Majorica finally spoke. “I see. Sorry for being rude so suddenly, Your Highness. I’m sorry to you too, Chris.”

The shopkeeper’s simple apology appeared to have gone unaccepted by the marshal, who clenched her fists soon after.

“But why did you ask me that?” Ein said.

“When you’re a person who handles seals for living, like yours truly, you have a feel for who may be a monster... Like yourself, Your Highness. You’ve become something of a beast that’s evolved through the consumption of magic stones,” Majorica replied.

“You’re not wrong there. I *do* have that ability.”

“S-Sir Ein?! You mustn’t...” Chris started.

“I think it’ll be fine. This is Majorica we’re talking about,” Ein replied.

The prince went on to explain how the Dullahan’s power had caused him to go berserk, just as he had told Kaizer the day before.

Majorica sighed. “Chris, is what His Highness saying here all true?”

Chris nodded before she further elaborated on Ein’s Toxin Decomposition EX skill, the Dryad’s Absorb skill, and what had occurred in Euro.

“You remind me of the World Tree, Your Highness,” Majorica remarked. Ein looked back at him, confused. “It’s said to be the ancestor of all Dryads, protecting all that live near it and absorbing the essence of evil monsters. It’s a godlike being.”

“Ancestor?” Ein asked. “You mean Dryads were born from the World Tree?”

“That’s how the legend goes. Since you’ve got some Dryad blood

in you, I can't help but feel there's some sort of connection."

"Right. That makes sense."

"In any case, thank you for filling me in on the full story. I now understand why you went to Kaizer, and why he sent you to me."

With that, Majorica stood up and swiftly doled out tea to his guests. He poured himself a rather large mug of the stuff, and stood on the opposite side of the counter.

"I know a thing or two about bolstering your health, Your Highness...along with some tidbits on the red foxes as well," Majorica stated.

"R-Really?!" Ein asked.

"That's right. It was quite a while ago, but I've flipped through a book on them. The records seemed to indicate that the foxes were friend and foe to many species. Their social standing was unclear, but it is clear that they're a bit tricky to deal with." Ein quietly nodded, hoping to hear the rest of this. "And as far as I know, there's one more thing about them: red foxes have the ability to strengthen monsters around them and manipulate them. I wasn't too taken with them back then, so as I said, I only scanned the contents of the book."

"Where did you read the book?"

"Give me a moment. I think I had a map around here somewhere... Found it."

A map illustrating the entire continent was splayed across Majorica's countertop. Several of the cities dotting the document were circled in red.

"Right here," Majorica said. "Magic City Ist. It's on the bleeding edge of magical tool technology; new inventions are born in this metropolis every day. Judging by your current health, I believe Ist is your best bet to gather information."

Majorica pointed at the eastern region of the continent, far north of the royal capital. For reference, the port city of Magna was located in the southern region of the map.

"The city is also considered to be a sacred place for experimentation, with the gigantic Tower of Wisdom overlooking its streets," Majorica explained. "The tower is an enormous research facility located in the center of the city. It was built over a century ago and funded by that era's merchants and researchers."

"Huh, I had no idea..." Ein murmured.

"To utilize magical tools, you require the energy extracted from magic stones. As large as a castle, the Tower of Wisdom is unrivaled in the production of this energy."

Ein's jaw dropped; he was shocked by the building's size.

"You can't miss it if you're in Ist. However, take some time to go and enjoy the sights too," Majorica encouraged.

“Ist... I’ve learned a bit about it from my geography class, but that’s about the extent of my knowledge.” Ein turned to the marshal. “Chris, how long would it take to reach Ist by water train?”

“Let’s see... There’s a direct route to Ist, so I think half a day should be enough,” Chris replied before she furrowed her brows. “However, I’ve been hearing that several orphans from the city’s slums have gone missing as of late. It’s usually safe, but this news has left me a bit concerned.”

“That sounds ominous...” Ein muttered.

“Why don’t you just order the documents you need?” Majorica suggested. “Besides, I’m sure you’ll be fine with Chris at your side.”

Majorica was right. If someone were bold enough to kidnap Ein with Chris nearby, he would have been in danger within the castle’s walls.

“Well, I’m doing this for my own well-being. I should probably be present,” Ein said.

Majorica proceeded to take out a piece of parchment. His pen glided over the paper.

“Uh... Research facility? Is that a letter of introduction?” Ein asked.

“I’ve got a few friends in the city,” Majorica replied. “One of them should know more about the red foxes as well. He’s also an expert on monsters, so he might be able to give you a hand along with a few tips on your current state.”

This was escalating quickly. Even the silently listening Chris seemed to be surprised by Majorica’s words.

“Ah, Your Highness,” Majorica said.

“Yes?” he replied.

“If you want even more information on red foxes and other monsters, there’s another city that should pique your curiosity.” He stopped writing and pointed to another location on the map. “Ishtarica has four major cities with the first located here: our royal capital.”

Majorica used the tip of his pen to point to the eastern region of the continent. “Next is the port city of Magna, and then Magic City Ist.” He then pointed his pen to the south before gliding it across to the continent’s northwest. “And finally...you mustn’t forget the Adventurer’s Town of Barth.”

Barth was much farther to the northwest than Ist.

“It’s known as a sacred place for adventurers,” Majorica explained. “There are quite a few monsters lurking nearby, not to mention the decorated remains of a colossus supposedly slain by the first king.”

“A-A colossus?” Ein asked eagerly.

“Oh, you seem enthusiastic about that. It’s not as massive as the Sea Dragon, but it’s still quite large.”

There were many who admired the first king, and they would often travel to Barth to get their start as adventurers. The materials brought to Barth were said to be distributed throughout the continent.

“And nearby the city is the Demon Lord’s former domain, which also contains the calamity’s onetime abode, the Demon Castle,” Majorica added.

Ein seemed to be trembling with excitement. He knew that the Demon Lord was a key figure in his research of the red foxes. The prince glanced at Chris, who gave a small nod in response.

“There have been several expeditions into the Demon Castle,” the marshal said. “I’ve gone there myself, but I’m against the idea of you stepping foot inside, Sir Ein.”

“Huh? Why?” Ein asked.

“There’s a presence of an unknown monster within.” Ein gulped while Chris’s serious gaze drilled into him. “It’s only a presence, but the feelings of terror it inspired remain fresh in my mind.”

Hence, the marshal deemed it to be a dangerous location.

“Again, I’m against you visiting the Demon Castle,” Chris firmly repeated. “In any case, your health is of the utmost priority! We’ll deal with the red foxes at a later date!”

“Well, I don’t think they should be set aside, but hm...” Ein mumbled.

Quite honestly, the boy’s interest was equally split between Ist and Barth. However, Majorica’s letter and Chris’s worries about traveling to Barth had tipped the scales in favor of a journey to Ist. *If I can find anything out about red foxes in Ist, I’ll look into it then*, Ein thought. He decided that he would float that suggestion by Silverd upon returning to the castle.

“It’s tempting, but I think I’ll go to Ist first,” Ein finally said.

It was unknown if Barth would provide the prince with any leads on the red foxes, and even if it did, a visit to the Demon Castle would be likely.

“Chris, I can visit Ist, right?” Ein asked.

“I’m in favor of that idea. I’m glad that you seem to have a handle on acting with a bit of restraint,” Chris replied with a beaming smile on her face.

Ein looked away while whistling—he knew that many of his prior actions had caused trouble for those around him.

“I’ll give you the letter, Chris,” Majorica said. “Don’t lose it, all right?”

“I-I won’t!” the marshal insisted.

“When you declare it so firmly, it makes me even more worried...”

Majorica mumbled. "Your Highness, you're going to hide your identity while in Ist, aren't you?"

"Yeah, I don't want to cause a fuss," Ein said as he remembered his instructor's words. "I actually asked Instructor Kaizer about this, but he mentioned that you might have a way to hide my appearance."

"Sure, I can craft a magical tool for your use. How many people will be in your entourage?" Majorica asked.

"Sir Ein, myself, and maybe Dill. We'll need three at most," Chris chimed in.

"Oh? Can a marshal like yourself leave the royal capital so easily?"

"Normally? No. However, I'll be providing His Majesty with a vacation request."

"Huh. Well, you've been working without a break, after all. It'll be a long vacation, but wouldn't that be an issue?"

"While I work directly under His Majesty now, Sir Lloyd is always by his side."

"Fair enough. Then for three magical tools...it'll total out to 15,000,000 G. The tools will be special robes that'll obscure your faces."

Ein's jaw dropped at the absurd amount of money, but Chris didn't bat an eye and replied, "Very well, we shall provide payment at a later date."

"Roger that. I'll have the tools crafted within a few days."

"Ch-Chris?! Are you sure about this?!" Ein stammered.

"Of course," the marshal replied. "This is quite cheap actually."

"R-Really?"

"Your Highness," Majorica added. "Magical tools are expensive, with some easily costing over 100,000,000 G."

The magical tools that Ein was familiar with could easily be purchased with a commoner's monthly salary. However, Majorica noted that special, custom-made tools would often come with a costly sales tag.

"Since Chris is here, I'm offering you a bit of a discount, you know?" Majorica said.

"I'm grateful for that..." Ein replied. "Speaking of, how do you two know each other?"

Chris froze in place while Ein looked to Majorica for answers.

"You haven't told him yet?" the shop owner asked.

"Ah ha ha ha..." The marshal gave a troubled laugh before she seemingly steeled her resolve and turned to the boy. "My older sister was actually in the same party as Majorica and Kaizer."

"Goodness... Why didn't you tell His Highness sooner?" Majorica accused.

“It was a difficult topic to bring up...”

Ein looked even more bewildered. “You have an older sister?”

“I do, though she was a bit of a troubled soul,” Chris replied.

“She really was,” Majorica agreed. “She was strong but mysterious, and I truly cannot fathom how Sir Lloyd didn’t stand a chance against her.”

Ein’s shock only grew. *She’s stronger than Lloyd?!* Chris’s older sister was clearly not a woman to be trifled with.

“Chris, what’s your older sister up to no—” Ein started.

“I-I’m terribly sorry,” Chris interjected. “But I shall only tell you a little at a time, so please let me off the hook for today.”

She looked away apologetically, and Majorica looked at the marshal with pity before glancing at the crown prince. The shopkeeper’s gaze seemed to imply that he’d like the prince to take it easy on Chris for the time being.

“Chris, that’s okay. I don’t mind,” Ein said. “Could you raise your head?”

Yet, she continued to look down like a dog who knew she’d done something wrong. Ein suddenly reached out and patted her golden hair. The marshal trembled for a split second before shifting to a posture more conducive to head pats.

“She’s been tamed quite well,” Majorica remarked with a dry smile.

Ein wore the same expression.

“Ack! I’m sorry, it was just so soothing and...” Chris replied in panic.

Something unexpected had happened at the end of their visit to Majorica’s store, but Ein had been able to accomplish his initial goal.

“You’re klutzy as ever,” Majorica mumbled, before telling the pair that he’d have the tools delivered to the castle soon.

Chris and Ein were ecstatic that they were off to a fruitful start upon leaving Majorica’s store. When the crown prince returned to the castle, he spoke with Silverd about his desire to research the red foxes in Ist.

“Here you go again,” Silverd said wearily.

Ein ultimately received the king’s approval, but on the condition that this research was conducted on the side.

A few days later, Ein was spending his evening on the beach behind the castle. The sounds of the ocean’s waves echoed in his ears while the magical tools scattered around him made it look as if he were attending a seaside party.

“Heh heh, it seems like you’re fine,” Krone energetically said as

she brightly smiled.

She took Ein's hands and walked backwards. Krone was giggling, both of her hands interlocked with his.

"I'm fine!" Ein insisted. "It'd be so embarrassing if people saw us like this!"

"Oh, I know," Krone teasingly replied. "That's why we're here, aren't we? Or do you not like holding hands with me?"

"That's not what I mean! I'm just embarrassed and stuff."

"This is very important. You're headed to Ist next week, aren't you? I have to make sure your body can make the trip."



Her reasoning was sound, but it was obvious that she was having fun assisting the crown prince in his rehabilitation.

“Well, I don’t hate it or anything,” Ein confessed.

He felt a little ticklish, but that was all. In fact, the time he spent with her was dear and precious to him.

“I wonder what I should do while you’re in Ist,” Krone wondered.

“Doesn’t the trading firm need help?”

“They do, but my grandfather is also leaving the royal capital next week. Speaking of, I believe he’s stopping by Ist as well.”

“Huh. If I run into him, I’d love to talk with him a bit.” Ein didn’t care much about his rank, but there was no need for him to be so worried about Krone’s grandfather. “I’m sure Graff will return with a few gifts for you, but I’ll pick up something for you too.”

“Thank you. I’m at my happiest when I receive gifts from you.”

The blushing Ein instantly looked away, embarrassed from hearing Krone’s sweet words and holding her hands. He cleared his throat and fixed his posture.

“Now then...” he started.

“Eep!” Krone suddenly cried.

The pair tripped, their legs caught in the sand. Upon noticing that he was about to fall on her, Ein swiftly took her hand and moved under her. With a soft thump, the crown prince fell onto the sand with Krone above him.

“A-Are you all right?” Ein asked.

“I am, thanks to you,” Krone replied.

An awkward silence fell between them as the roaring of the waves seemed to have grown louder than before.

“Ein...” Krone said as she caressed his cheek with one hand.

“Hm?” Ein replied, trying to remain calm in contrast to the thumping of his heart.

Her silky blue hair was blown by the ocean breeze and against Ein’s cheeks, with her sweet scent ticking his nose. Krone had kissed him on the cheek during the Sea Dragon incident, claiming that it was a blessing from the Goddess. However, they were closer than ever before this time. In fact, Ein could hear the quick beating of her heart alongside his.

“Will you come home safe this time?” Krone asked, using her other hand to caress his other cheek and cupping his face in her hands.

“Yeah, I promise,” Ein replied.

“Really? It won’t be a repeat of Euro?”

“It won’t; I’ll do my best to prevent that from happening ever again... And if something does happen to me, I’ll keep my promise to

you.”

Krone looked down and smiled as she remembered their date.

“Okay. I know you’ll keep your promise.”

She then proceeded to act a touch spoiled—an unusual sight for her. She released the strength of her upper body and fell on top of Ein, closing the gap between them.

She giggled. “Your heart is beating really loudly.”

“I won’t deny that,” Ein said. “But...”

He fell silent, unable to state that Krone’s heart was also beating just as loudly. When he saw her look so happy, he decided to stop acting so shy and instead become a little brazen himself.

“This isn’t bad, is it? It’s good to be like this every now and then,” he finished.

Krone blinked before she smiled.

“Keep it a secret from everyone, okay?” Ein requested.

“Of course. I won’t tell anyone, not even His Majesty,” Krone replied.

The two joyfully smiled at each other until Krone raised herself from Ein and took his hand. The couple sat next to each other on the beach.

“I actually have something I wanted to give you,” Krone said.

“To me?” Ein asked.

“We’ll be apart for a short while, won’t we? There aren’t any practical applications for this tool just yet, but here’s a new kind of message bird that can go back and forth between two people.”

It had been a while since Ein had heard talk of message birds. While the tool’s use was dependent on distance, they were quite costly to use. Surprised that the tool wasn’t a one-use item, the prince wasn’t sure if he felt comfortable taking such a gift so easily.

“My grandfather invested some money into Ist’s research facility, leading to the creation of this item,” Krone explained.

“Wow. I didn’t think Graff did things like this. Are there any other new features to this item?”

“Message birds are expensive, aren’t they? Well, this new type is more affordable and allows commoners to communicate with ease. He actually plans to sell it as a consumer product.”

“You say that so easily, but that’s amazing.”

“Heh heh. However, it takes a few hours for messages to be relayed.”

That was still fast enough. Krone took out a small crystal ball from her pocket and rested it in the palm of her hand. It was simple to use—the user only needed to exert their magical energy while vocalizing their message.

“Here you go. I’ll hold on to the other half of this pair,” Krone

said.

“Thank you. How many trips can this message bird make?” Ein asked.

“Three or so is what I believe my grandfather told me. The tool will give off a pale glow if it receives a message. If you pour your magical energy into the tool as you do when sending a message, you can even hear the sender’s voice.”

That didn’t seem bad at all. Ein would be a good distance away in Ist, but he’d still be able to communicate with Krone. If he could hear her words, that would be more than enough motivation to keep him going.

“You can send me a message whenever you get lonely, okay?” Krone said.

“And you can do the same. Whenever you get lonely,” Ein said, trying to be a little more defiant. When he saw her pouting, he smiled. “Sorry, sorry. I’ll send you a message as soon as I arrive in Ist. Wait for me, okay?”

And with that, Krone happily smiled in response.

Chapter Four: A Place Called Magic City Ist

With a direct line from White Rose Station to Magic City Ist available, Ein found himself stepping aboard an expensive water train reserved for aristocrats. Chris and Dill were by the crown prince's side along with Majorica's freshly prepared tools. However, the party's journey to Ist had already hit a snag.

"Ahhh... That's the spot! Purrfect! Could you squeeze a little harder?"

Katima had suddenly requested to tag along, but there wasn't a tool prepared for her to use. Ever the crafty cat, she had a plan of her own.

"I didn't think you'd hop aboard the train as luggage," Ein mumbled.

"I'll be in disguise until we get to Ist," Katima said. "So rest assured... Ah! That's the spot!"

Ein was massaging her neck, soothing her aching body—it must've been rather troublesome for her to make it aboard. Katima expressed her catlike joy, doing away with any shred of pride she had left. She was resting on a sofa in the lounge of a car that Ein and his party had set up shop in. Katima threw her head back while enjoying Ein's massage and appeared to be completely messing around.

"In any case, this magical tool is pretty convenient," Ein said.

He immediately took off Majorica's special robe when he entered his section of the train.

"Sir Ein, there aren't many skilled craftsmen like Majorica around," Chris said.

"Even though he has a strange...fashion sense?" Ein asked.

"Yes, even though he has a strange fashion sense."

The pair looked at each other and sighed.

"By the way, I'm surprised that grandfather allowed you to come along, Katima," the crown prince said.

"He owes me a few favors or rewards, mew know. Remember that book I showed mew earlier? It was quite a feat to compile all my research into that volume. So, I asked to go to Ist as a reward."

Princess Katima surely wasn't allowed to leave the royal capital often, but this trip to Ist was a perfect opportunity for a scientific mind such as herself.

“Heh heh heh! I’m pawsitively excited!”

“We’ve still got a long way to go, so don’t use up all your energy right away,” Ein warned.

“I know! Mrow! Do you think I’m a child or something?”

“No, you’re much noisier than a— I mean, nothing.”

Ein stopped himself with a strained laugh and shifted his gaze outside the window. His eyes met Chris’s for a brief moment, and the marshal immediately understood what he was implying. The group left White Rose in the early evening with the water train set to arrive at its destination in the morning.

The nobles’ section of the train was indeed luxurious and furnished with rooms for each person on board. Ein and the rest of the party chatted over dinner before retiring to their own sleeping quarters.

Sometime later, Ein opened his eyes and realized that it was the middle of the night after checking a nearby clock. Considering that his throat was dry, he figured that might have been why he woke up.

“Guess I’ll head to the lounge,” he mumbled to himself, hoping to find something that would quench his thirst.

There were a number of complimentary beverages made available to the train’s passengers. Ein opened his door and proceeded to stroll down the corridor. On his way to the lounge, he stared out of one of the train’s windows. He could see scattered specks of light dotting the dark night’s scenery—an atmosphere quite different from that of the royal capital. Shortly after, he finally arrived at the lounge.

“Huh? What’s the matter, Sir Ein?” Chris asked.

She was already there. Unlike her usual work demeanor, Chris gently smiled at the boy.



“I was just feeling a bit thirsty. What about you?” Ein asked.

“Ah, I was feeling the same as well.”

She was seated at a small bar situated in a corner of the lounge. The marshal’s usual armor and uniform were nowhere to be seen. In fact, she was dressed in a sleeveless blouse and tight-fitting pants that accentuated her figure.

“If you’d like, will you join me?” Chris asked.

In her personal clothes, she seemed a bit different from usual. Her elegant fingers were wrapped around a glass and her slender legs were neatly crossed underneath the table. It’s not like Chris *wasn’t* appealing in her professional attire, but her current appearance seemed to better fit her personality. Ein gave a small nod.

“Then can I sit next to you?” Ein asked.

“Of course. I shall prepare a drink for you right away.” She stood up and walked towards a selection of drinks. “What would you like?”

“Some cold juice, please. Ah, you were drinking mulled wine.”

“I find it easier to fall asleep after a glass before bed. However, I’ll go get you a cup of juice.”

The prince was at a chic bar alongside a beautiful blonde elf, but he was left drinking juice. Ein felt there was no way he could spin this in an effort to look cool. He simply smiled instead.

“Thank you for your patience,” Chris said. “Here you are.”

She appeared by his side and slid the drink to him before she sat down again. A sweet fragrance emanated from her nape, a slight but sly trick.

In the next moment, Ein was instinctively facing a nearby window. “We’re above a bridge.”

The train was now traveling over a large body of water, but Ein couldn’t tell whether it was just a river or the ocean. Regardless, the long bridge seemed to go on endlessly.

“Much of the water around us is brackish,” Chris explained. “The river below us is one of the continent’s largest, and this bridge just happens to also be the longest in the country.”

“Ah, I see. No wonder I can’t see where it ends,” Ein replied before he proceeded to take a swig from his cup.

Once the prince’s thirst was quenched, Chris remarked, “I don’t think I’ve ever had the chance to talk with you in such a relaxed manner, Sir Ein.”

She took her glass of mulled wine in her hand and gazed at the liquid inside. Perhaps it was from the wine, but Chris’s cheeks were a tad red when Ein glanced over to her.

“Now that you mention it, you’re right,” Ein replied. “We’ve traveled together a lot, but I don’t think we’ve ever had an

opportunity like this.”

“It’s been a good number of years since we first met at the port in Roundheart.”

“That takes me back. At first, I had my guard up around you.”

“Heh, you did. Members of the Knights Guard still talk about it quite a bit.”

“Wait, what?! Huh?”

“To tell you the truth, the Knights Guard was in the middle of judging your character. Though Lady Olivia had periodically sent reports back to Ishtarica, we still couldn’t tell what kind of man you were until we met you in person.”

The marshal couldn’t deny that she had held a prejudice or two against Heim. Even though Ein was Olivia’s boy, Chris had been under the impression that Rogas’s blood ran through his veins. With that in mind, she hadn’t been sure if she had it in her to accept Ein as the crown prince back then. Ishtarica’s citizens were likely just as conflicted as their former vice captain was. Upon realizing this, Ein found himself ruminating over his past actions, which had surely troubled many.

“Mmm...” Chris murmured as she rubbed her eyes sleepily.

Maybe she was about to go to sleep when I entered. The crown prince felt bad for keeping her awake.

“Chris, if you’re sleepy, you can...” Ein started.

“I’m fine!” Chris insisted. “I’m not sleepy at all!”

“You don’t have to act all tough.”

Ein gazed into her eyes and noticed that the marshal was indeed sleepy. However, instead of pushing the topic further, he decided to change the subject.

“Speaking of, this feels like a bit of a journey, doesn’t it?” Ein said.

“We’re here to investigate the city and check on your health, aren’t we?”

“Right, but we sneaked out of the castle while hiding our identities. It feels like we’ve gone on a journey.”

“Ah ha ha. I suppose so. I’d say it’s of the same ilk.”

“We do have important matters at hand, but I never dreamed that I’d be doing something like this.”

The boy’s very first long-distance trip was from Roundheart to Heim’s royal capital. He remembered his mother joyfully proclaiming that they could finally go on something of a journey. Ein was all smiles, but Chris’s frown showed a bit of concern.

“We have some serious matters to attend to and I hope you won’t be so carefree in addressing them,” she warned.

“I know. My health is important, and we also have to ask about

the red foxes.”

“Precisely. We have only the most vital...of...issues...” Chris started to trail off, with her eyes half-closed in a sleepy stupor. “Hm, you thought I looked sleepy again, didn’t you?”

“You know me very well.”

“I’ve told you already. I’m...not...sleepy...”

Her words lacked gusto and it was quite clear that she was nodding off—she was at her limit.

“I know, but I’d like to go on a journey like this again sometime,” Ein said.

No matter the reason, the prince was a big fan of lengthy road trips. He waited for a response from Chris before suggesting they get to bed, but none came. It was too late—the nearby marshal was already fast asleep, using her arm like a pillow as a child would. As Ein peered at her visage, he could hear her breathing along steadily. His gaze wandered to the marshal’s closed eyes, noticing her accentuated eyelashes and slightly wine-stained lips.

“Now then...” Ein whispered.

What was he to do? He couldn’t just return to his bed and leave Chris in the lounge. He was willing to either wait for her to wake up or carry her to her bed.

“Guess I’ll carry her.”

He didn’t want to arrive in Ist without being fully rested. The tall Chris was still a bit too large for the small boy to carry, but...

“Wow, she’s light.”

Upon putting his hands behind Chris’s knees and her back, Ein realized that he could carry her out with ease. He walked out to the passageway and used his legs to pry open the door to her sleeping quarters before gently placing her on the bed.

“Good.”

Ein placed a blanket over his marshal and whispered, “Good night,” before he left the room.

Upon their arrival in Ist the next morning, Chris approached the crown prince as soon as they walked off the water train.

“Sir Ein,” she said. “Um, how did we part ways last night?”

“We said good night and went back to our respective rooms,” Ein innocently replied.

“A-Ah, I see. Thank goodness.”

There was no need to provoke her here, so Ein thought it was best to tell a little white lie in this situation. The party was on their way out of the station when the prince expressed his shock at the Istian ticket gate.

“There’s no magical tool to take our tickets,” he muttered.

In place of the standard ticket-exchange tool was a pair of rectangular, silver platforms placed on the floor and ceiling. Ein noticed that these platforms gave off a faint green glow whenever a person passed through the gate.

“See? The magical tools above and below us will scan the ticket for mew,” Katima explained. “Just make sure to keep your ticket in your paw.”

The first princess had done away with her usual white lab coat, opting to wear a different set of attire topped off with a pair of glasses. Ein and his two guards had donned different apparel underneath their robes as well.

“I never knew a tool like that existed,” Ein said in awe.

“It’ll be implemented in White Rose soon too,” his aunt said.

“Convenient, isn’t it?”

There was no knowing just how much effort had been put into crafting a tool that could automatically review tickets. The crown prince was extremely impressed by Ist’s researchers already.

“Yeah, I’m starting to get a feel for just how awesome this city is,” Ein replied.

This station wasn’t as busy as White Rose, but it was still bustling with life—Ist was one of the nation’s four major cities, after all. Due to the morning rush hour, the numerous adults around them were dressed in either suits or lab coats.

“What are our plans for today?” Ein asked.

“Why don’t we head to our lodging first?” Dill suggested. “I’ve been to Ist a few times with my father, and I’m aware of a few places for aristocratic stays.”

“That’s helpful, but we can just stay in a normal inn, you know.”

“We mustn’t. His Majesty firmly informed me that cheap lodging isn’t an option.”

They were traveling incognito, but Ein was still the crown prince. The boy reluctantly relented. With Dill at the front, they navigated through the station’s crowds before they set foot on Ist’s main street—the city’s pride and joy. Yet again, it was as though they’d entered a completely different world.

“Wow...” Ein gasped.

Ist’s cityscape was impressive—gothic architecture lined both sides of the bustling main street. Steeples could be seen resting on the rooftops, and dark-brown, almost-antique lampposts stood equidistantly on the road’s shoulders. Horse-drawn carriages were often seen in the royal capital, but monsters were in charge of pulling the wagons in Ist. From bison-like monsters to wingless dragons, many kinds of monsters walked the streets.

The pavement was a neatly lined up orange stone; however, the thick iron pipes that ran along the rooftops often caught the eyes of passersby. When looking up from those pipes, Ein noticed that a dark gray sky loomed overhead.

“Mrow! Ein, take a look,” Katima said. “That’s the symbol of Ist, the Tower of Wisdom.”

Katima pointed to the center of the city, past the main street.

“Th-That’s the Tower of Wisdom?” Ein stammered.

He was shocked by the size. In terms of width, it was smaller than White Night Castle, but the tower itself was much taller.

“It’s fifty stories high. A meowssive amount of ore was processed just for this tower...and look at all the huge pipes that surround it! They let out turquoise steam, proof that the tower is constantly generating energy... As a researcher, I find this structure to be a work of art. If I were to offurr one small complaint, it’s that the whole thing’s completely reliant on an old furnace.”

“Well, seeing how massive this tower is, I can tell that it’d take a lot of work to remodel it,” Ein replied.

Upon closer inspection, one could notice that the tower’s pipes ran throughout the city. The sight left the impression that Ist was completely dependent on the tower, and as such, the entire city revolved around it.

“What’s in the tower? A research facility?” Ein asked.

“Purreciscely However, only a select few of its researchers are even given their own office. In fact, the government isn’t really allowed to give the tower any orders. It’s a one-of-a-kind building within our nation.”

“Huh... Have you ever been inside?”

“I have, but as it’s a purrivately owned institution, no royal or state official is provided with an office.”

Katima seemed enamored as she gazed upon the Tower of Wisdom. It was obvious that this monolithic building was of great importance.

“And even if mew *can* hold an office in there, the maintenance costs are through the roof... And the screening is strict...”

“So it’s really costly to maintain an office, I take it?”

“Absurdly expensive, my furr-end. Even if I were to walk over there with my current assets, I still wouldn’t be able to afford it.”

Ein’s cheek twitched as he thought of the high upkeep cost. “In any case, the town is filled with magical tools regardless.”

Even the station was totally different from anything in the royal capital. However, unpleasant thoughts started to flash across Ein’s mind.

“Mother had to be married off to Heim for those sea crystals, and

yet there's a city that uses their tools like they're nothing..." he muttered.

He was aware that these costs were necessary for research, but even so, there was a part of him that couldn't seem to forgive this sight. The prince had to keep telling himself that this couldn't be helped.

Dill gently placed a hand over the prince's back. "Sir Ein, let's go. I shall guide you to a lodging that even my father is quite fond of."

To the crown prince, Dill's actions and thoughtful words were quite reminiscent of those of an older brother.

"Thank you," Ein replied. "I shouldn't be so down because of this. Ah, that reminds me..."

Ein remembered the message bird he'd received from Krone. They weren't at their lodging yet, but they'd arrived in Ist. He took the magical tool from his chest pocket and brought it close to his mouth, hoping the nearby racket wouldn't drown his voice out.

"Krone, I'm finally in Ist. It's a bit chillier than Kingsland, but the Tower of Wisdom is far grander than what I'd imagined. I'm looking forward to exploring it," Ein said, before he wrapped up his message by stating that he was headed for his party's lodging.

The message bird immediately gave off a pale-blue glow, blinked a few times, and returned to normal. Satisfied, Ein headed to the lodge with Dill leading the group.

Once Ein and his group had dropped off their belongings at the lodge, the crown prince roamed around the city with Majorica's letter of introduction in hand. The address listed on the letter led him to the Ist Academy of Grand Wizardry. He was certainly at the right place, but he couldn't hide his confusion.

"Over here," Katima said, leading the way. "That's the research facility's academy. The actual research center is over here, mew see."

Ein was guided away from the building's premises and led down a different road. A five-story, European-style building greeted him. In front of the iron bar gate was a small guardhouse with the gate itself securely fastened by what appeared to be many locks or magical tools. Upon seeing Ein's entourage approaching, the guards stepped out brandishing stern glares.

"I feel like we aren't being welcomed," Ein muttered.

"Can mew blame them? Mew three are wearing adventurers' robes and I'm a Cait-Sith."

"Well, I guess now isn't the time to be worried about stuff like that."

Moments later, one of the guards barked out a question,

“Adventurers, huh? That’s rare. Do you guys have a letter of introduction?”

“Right here,” Chris said, fishing out the letter.

“Allow me to confirm the contents. I apologize in advance, but most adventurers often arrive with fake letters, so we check each of them thoroughly. I hope this doesn’t upset you.”

“Not at all. Please do so.”

The guard’s attitude completely changed the moment he placed his eyes on the letter. He widened his eyes with shock before yelling to a colleague in the guardhouse, “Hey! Bring the chairman here immediately!”

“Y-You mean Professor Oz?” the other guard asked.

“Yeah! Just hurry up and call him here!”

Ein was a little confused, but he could tell that a chairman was certainly someone of high rank.

“Pardon me, honored guests. I beg you for your patience,” the guard said. Ein and the party were shocked by the man’s total change in demeanor.

Just how effective was Majorica’s letter? How much influence did Majorica even have? It was surely quite a bit. A few moments later, a guard returned with a middle-aged man jogging behind him.

“Hah... Hah... I-I apologize for the wait! And you are...?” huffed a middle-aged man of average height and weight. While he was catching his breath, Ein noticed that he had a bit of messy stubble covering his face and that his wavy, reddish-brown hair was covered in soot. His spotless, white lab coat seemed to fit him, as did his round glasses, which implied a fair bit of intelligence.

“I’m sorry for our sudden visit,” Ein replied to the man, whom he assumed to be the chairman. “We’re here today because we wanted to look into a few matters.”

“Apologize? Please don’t!” the man insisted. “I’m only grateful to see that you’ve come all this way!”

He needed a few moments to catch his breath before he continued, “My name is Oz, and I’m the chairman of the Ist Academy of Grand Wizardry. I didn’t think you’d be introduced by the professor emeritus, Majorica.”

“P-Professor emeritus?” Ein stammered.

“Indeed. That is Sir Majorica’s title at our institution.”

That guy with the weird fashion sense was a professor? Is this a joke? Ein looked at Oz, who seemed as serious as ever. The prince glanced over at his knights and saw that they were both equally stunned by this revelation.

Ein's party was led into Oz's office—the room contained a library's worth of bookshelves, a sofa for guests, and a desk in the back that appeared to be a catchall for the chairman's documents. While he was scanning the room, Ein noticed a good number of magic stones within their own bespoke glass cases.

"Please, have a seat," Oz encouraged.

Ein and Katima took a seat on the sofa while their knightly companions stood guard behind them.

"As I said before, I'm Oz. My field of expertise is in the study of magic stone energetics. Namely, I research the energy that magic stones possess."

On their way here, Katima had told Ein a few snippets about the chairman. He was a pioneer in the research of magic stones, contributing an immense pool of knowledge to the country. Oz was considered to be an irreplaceable figure.

"I think you already know this from reading Majorica's letter, but I'm Ein," the boy said as he pulled back his hood.

"Thank you so much for coming, Your Highness, Crown Prince Ein. Please forgive me for simply referring to you as my 'important guests' earlier. As there were others around, I believed it was best to keep the details of professor emeritus Majorica's letter a secret."

"I agree. I thank you for your kind consideration."

"I'm relieved to hear you say that," Oz replied with a smile.

"Then I guess we should introduce the rest of our group. Is that all right with you three?" Ein asked.

He thought that Katima should be the first one to be introduced, but the first princess instead glanced towards Chris, who took off her hood.

"Then I shall go first. My name is Christina Wernstein, and I serve as the marshal of Ishtarica's Knights Guard. Pleased to meet you."

Dill followed suit and removed his hood. "My name is Dill Gracier. As a guard-in-training, I have been given the honor of protecting Sir Ein."

"And I'm Katima von Ishtarica. I'm honored to be able to meet someone as famous as you, Professor Oz. Truly, this is a delight."

Ein was shocked to hear the words of a proper lady come out of Katima's mouth, complete with all the grace and elegant mannerisms one would expect of an aristocrat. The Cait-Sith proceeded to stand and do a little curtsy with her clothes.

"Katima?! Why are you acting like a princess?!" Ein cried.

"Sir Ein! Lady Katima is a princess!" Chris replied.

"But Chris, this is Katima we're talking about!"

Katima was clearly annoyed that her introduction had been ruined by her nephew's foolish remarks, but the crown prince remained none

the wiser for it.



“Ah! To think I’d have the honor of meeting Her Royal Highness The First Princess! The much heralded ‘brains of the royal capital!’” Oz gushed.

“Under the assumption I’d be assisting my nephew, I forced His Majesty to approve my visit. This is truly a rare opportunity for me, and I hope to learn many things in Ist before I return home,” Katima said.

“That would be our pleasure!” Oz replied before he turned to the prince. “Forgive me, Your Highness Ein. As a fellow researcher, I simply couldn’t contain my excitement.”

“I don’t mind at all,” Ein replied. “Please take all the time you need with Katima later.”

It would surely make the princess happy, so Ein was seemingly pushing for Oz to watch over his aunt while they were in town.

“Now then, I suppose we should get to business,” Oz said. “Your Highness, it seems you require my aid.”

“Indeed. To start...” Ein replied.

There were roughly two things that Ein had arrived for assistance with: his health, and information on the red foxes. Oz seemed unable to hide his shock as he intently listened along. His interest as a man of science had surely been piqued.

“How very interesting. Your physical condition is also quite intriguing, Prince Ein,” Oz pondered. He looked down for a short while before he raised his head again. “I now understand why you were introduced to me. The red foxes, and your health... I do agree that I may be the best man for the job.”

Oz pioneered the study of magic stones, after all.

“But I’ve only got more questions,” the chairman confessed. “I didn’t think you’d absorbed the Dullahan’s *and* the Elder Lich’s magic stones. Could you give me a moment? I’d like to show you something.”

He stood up and approached the magic-stone-filled glass cases that lined the walls of his office.

“Professor Oz?” Chris asked.

“Rest assured, Dame Christina. These have been sealed by the professor emeritus, so there’s no need to worry about the power of these stones running wild.”

Ein gave a strained smile. During the Sea Dragon incident, Ein had used the Elder Lich’s power to forcibly break such a seal. He knew that he couldn’t let his guard down even around Majorica’s seals. Chris, perhaps thinking the same thing, looked to be on guard.

Moments later, Oz brought in a small box decorated with luxurious metal carvings.

“Inside this box is just the information that you’ve been looking for, Prince Ein,” the chairman said.

“The information that *I*’ve been looking for?” Ein repeated quizzically.

Oz removed the lid to reveal a pair of magic stones. The pair appeared to be poisonous due to the purplish flames flickering within them. However, unlike other stones, no discernible scent hit Ein’s nose.

“These are very valuable,” Oz explained.

Chris suddenly reacted to the chairman’s words, reaching for Ein’s hands and clutching them tightly.

“I’m sorry, Sir Ein. Would you please stay as you are for a short while?” Chris asked.

Even Oz seemed shocked at this sight, but Chris’s sharp gaze encouraged the chairman to continue on.

“These are the magic stones of red foxes,” Oz finished.

Ein realized why the marshal had grabbed his hands. The prince could sense Chris’s apprehension from the trembling of her warm hands. *Is the Elder Lich inside me stopping the Dullahan? I wish they’d keep their marriage quarrels to a minimum.* Ein gave a forced laugh.

“That’s very valuable indeed,” the boy said. “Professor Oz, while I would like your assistance regarding my health, would you mind also informing me of your findings regarding the red foxes? You’ll be rewarded accordingly, of course.”

“Oh, a reward isn’t necessary at all,” the chairman replied.

“But...”

“To be quite honest, I was able to learn quite a bit from you. So for any information you exchange with me, my knowledge will be simply shared with you in kind. That said, would you mind giving me a few days to draft a report on the red foxes?”

“But as a crown prince, I mustn’t just ask something of you without compensation. Isn’t that right, Chris?”

“It’s exactly as Sir Ein says,” Chris replied. “We would like to avoid any situation that makes the crown prince out to be abusing his power and social standing.”

“Is that so?” Oz said. “Hm...”

“It’s not just limited to money,” Ein added. “Is there anything that we could do for you?”

The chairman folded his arms in front of him and thought for a while before he spoke once more. “Then could I borrow your support for one issue? As you may already know, there’s been this recent rash of child abductions here in Ist.”

Chris had stated the same worries in Majorica’s store.

“Those targeted appear to be orphans from the slums, but it still

pains me to see this happening,” Oz explained. “How about it? Prince Ein, would you kindly lend me your support? I’d love to increase the number of knights on the street to track down the culprit of these heinous crimes.”

Is this man a saint? Ein was moved by how altruistically motivated Oz seemed to be.

“I understand,” Ein said. “I’ll tell the knights and I’ll personally offer my assistance to the investigation.”

Everyone else in the room seemed shocked.

“S-S-Sir Ein?!” Chris said. “E-Even if I’m by your side, there’s no reason for you to be involved in something so dangerous!”

“But aren’t the Sea Dragon and red foxes even more dangerous?” Ein pointed out.

“You can’t equate the two! The issue is whether it calls for your dispatch, Sir Ein!”

Indeed. Ein’s sense of justice and desire to repay Oz’s favor had caused the prince to speak carelessly. He immediately regretted his words, believing he had crossed the line.

“But I don’t want to just sit here and do nothing,” Ein mumbled. Then he had an idea. “Professor Oz did mention that it’ll take him a few days to draft up a report on the red foxes, right? How about this: I’ll only be personally involved in this while we wait for the report to come back.”

“Well, I suppose it’s better to let you move around than to forcibly restrain you,” Chris muttered as she listened to this idea.

“Wow... So that’s how you look at me every day, I take it?”

“Of course. You didn’t stop when I tried to restrain you during the Magnus incident.”

Ein fell silent, unable to refute the truth.

“Professor Oz, Sir Ein will personally join the investigation just for a few days. After that, the knights will take it from there,” Chris said. “I hope that’s not an issue with you.”

“Not at all!” Oz replied. “But for Prince Ein to personally join the investigation...”

“The alternative would be just to laze about in my lodging. Please don’t be bothered by it,” the prince said.

Chris adjusted her attitude, resolving to protect her prince no matter what. She believed that if they remained in crowded areas, all would be well.

“Prince Ein, please do your best to exercise caution and prioritize your safety,” Oz warned. “I shall have the report ready in a few days. I will inform you when it is complete.” The chairman immediately walked over to his desk and grabbed a stack of various reports. “These documents may clue you in to the state of your health, Your Highness.

Please take them and sift through them when time allows. I have a few more leads on hand, but I'll provide them to you alongside the completed red fox report."

"That's a huge help! Thank you!" Ein cried. He glanced at the clock in the room and noticed that it was already evening. "We'll take our leave for now. Thank you so much for your time today."

"I found it very beneficial for myself as well," the chairman replied. "I'll see you to the door."

"We'll be fine. I feel bad to see you go so far for us."

"In that case, I'll call the guards over to escort you out. Could you all please take care to don your robes? And one more thing..." Oz opened a locked drawer of his desk and retrieved a leather-wrapped envelope. "These ancient Istian research documents should have been destroyed long ago, but they might provide some insight as to what's going on with your body."

"Th-Thank you so much... You've done so much for me!" Ein said as he tried to bow.

Oz raised his hand to stop him. "There's no need for you to be so reserved. I myself was able to meet you, Your Highness, and I have learned much from our meeting today."

With that, Oz rang the bell and the guards immediately stepped into the room.

"Did you call?" the guard asked.

"Our guests will be leaving, so could you please guide them out?" Oz requested.

"As you wish. Ah, and I've received a letter for you, Professor. Here you are." Once the guard handed the letter over, he turned to Ein. "I shall guide you outside."

And so, the guard escorted Ein's party out. Oz watched on as they left, only opening the letter once his door was firmly shut.

"It seems it's about time," the chairman murmured with a sigh. He used his index finger to languidly readjust his glasses.

On the way back to their lodging, Ein had noticed a handful of horse-drawn carriages lined up on the side of the street. Taking note of the traffic around them, Ein noticed that the carriages were parked in front of a specific building.

"I apologize for having you personally come here, Chairman," a merchant said as he approached the carriage.

A familiar figure emerged from the front carriage. "I don't mind. I strongly believe that I should confirm these matters with my own eyes."

The elderly figure was Graff Agustos, Krone's grandfather. As the

two men conversed, employees of the Agustos Trading Firm entered the building and quickly returned carrying a wooden box that they proceeded to load onto the carriage.

“We’re honored to be able to do business with the up-and-coming Agustos Trading Firm,” the merchant remarked. “All the magic stones you’ve requested are within that box. If anything seems amiss or if you require more stones, please let me know.”

“Very well. This was indeed a good deal,” Graff replied.

“Are you sending these to the Tower of Wisdom?”

Graff gave a hearty laugh. “Ha ha ha! It’s unwise to talk about my business, but I suppose it’s no secret if I’m carrying a large load of magic stones around Ist!”

“Ha ha ha, I apologize for my boorish comment. I hope you have the chance to enjoy our fair city for at least a little while.”

Seeing as Graff was in the middle of a business deal, Ein decided to refrain from walking over to speak with him. Given that he was traveling in secret, it seemed foolish for him to talk with Graff while he was working. The incognito prince wasn’t the only one watching on, as Chris had also been watching the scene play out.

“I’d expect no less from the Agustos Trading Firm,” she noted. “I didn’t think that they’d already have connections in Ist.”

“They’re amazing. It’s crazy to think that it’s only been a few years,” Ein replied.

“Even Sir Warren holds Sir Graff’s expertise in high regard. If you ask me, I’m a tad ecstatic to see Heim have a bit of their economic power whittled away.”

The smiling Chris had let out a giggle and the prince’s party proceeded to silently pass by Graff on the way to their lodging.

Chapter Five: The Tower of Wisdom

Ein pushed open the door to his lodging to be greeted by oodles of luxury items, trinkets quite fitting for an aristocrat. It was the prince's reminder that even houses like that of Gracier were known to frequent this location.

The main lobby was adorned with moving paintings. In particular, a painting of a horse running through a grassy field had caught Ein's eye. If he were to compare this phenomenon to anything from his past life, the prince would liken it to watching something on TV. The thick strokes of oil paint spread across the canvas moved around freely. The boy could only explain it as magic.

As they tried to head to their rooms, Katima tugged on Dill's sleeve.

"Now!" the princess claimed.

"Pardon me, Lady Katima. May I ask why you're tugging on my robe?" Dill asked.

"We're gonna go to the city! Plenty of shopping to do, mew know!"

"I see. And you're telling me to tag along."

"I'm glad to see how astute mew are. Come now! We should 'strike while the iron is hot' as they say!"

With a loud huff, Katima dashed outside. Dill glanced over to Ein, who nodded in return. The knight then proceeded to chase after the feline princess.

"Chris..." Ein started.

"It will be fine. Lady Katima won't push her limits like you will... Or so I believe," the marshal knowingly replied.

"All right, then... Huh, isn't it getting noisy?"

A large middle-aged man had caught Ein's attention; he was making quite the ruckus at the front desk.

"Why not?! Why isn't my usual room open?!" the man demanded, speaking in a deep voice.

A uniquely groomed beard covered the lower half of his violently red face. Speaking of that lower half, the veins popping out of the man's neck conveyed how he felt all too well. Several of the knights and servants who worked under him had their arms crossed as they wore troubled expressions on their faces.

"I-I'm terribly sorry..." the receptionist apologized. "A different

guest will be staying in the room from today.”

“Are you messing with me?!” the man roared. “This is all because you numbskulls refuse to leave a room open for me! Argh, this is troublesome! Fine, I’ll pay you extra to chase those guests out!”

The man’s absurd demands had left Ein with a strained smile on his face, but the prince quickly came to a realization.

“Uh... Are we perhaps staying in the room that man is going on about?” Ein asked.

“I-Indeed, I’ve been thinking the same thing,” Chris replied.

“What should we do? I don’t mind giving the room to him.”

“There’s no need for you to act so reserved, Sir Ein. But still, his actions are rather unsightly.”

The receptionist shook their head at the man’s demand, prompting him to furiously slam his fist onto the counter.

“Very well!” the man yelled. “I’ll never use this lodge again!”

“P-Please wait, Viscount!” the receptionist called.

“Ah, I thought he looked familiar...” Chris said. “His name is Sage; he’s from a viscounty.”

“Huh... Is he famous?” Ein asked.

“His household is quite famous and has a long history behind it. Their previous Viscount was superb. In fact, His Majesty had seen him in a rather favorable light. However, the house’s finances have appeared to be on the decline since Sage took over.”

Ein gave an honest nod. He could easily imagine a man of Sage’s temperament being unable to handle household affairs.

“Come on, let’s go!” Viscount Sage bellowed, taking strides wider than Katima’s. “You’ll regret this! You’ll rue the day you lost a customer who can control wyverns and krakens like I can!”

Ein looked surprised. “He can control krakens?”

“I believe only a small species of kraken,” Chris explained. “There are a few kinds, but I doubt he could care for a large one. At best, maybe one around thirty meters long.”

“Ah, I see. I didn’t even know people sold krakens.”

“There are firms that sell monsters. In some cases, aristocrats can file a request to have an adventurer capture the monster they’re looking for. However, the owner would be held responsible if the beast caused any harm.”

“No wonder. I now see why they could keep monsters.”

“But I don’t think his household has the funds to purchase any beasts...”

Chris seemed to be deep in thought while Ein watched the ruckus die down.

“Why don’t we return to our room?” the prince suggested.

“Ah, good call,” Chris replied. “Let’s take a small rest.”

The two rode on an elevator-like contraption constructed out of magical tools and pulleys. Upon reaching the lodge's top floor, the pair headed to their room.

The prince's party had opted to meet with Oz right away upon dropping off their luggage at the reception desk, meaning that they hadn't had the time to check out their sprawling accommodations. As they entered the lavish room, the pair quickly noticed that the furniture surrounding them had a uniquely Istian flair to it. Ein's eyes sparkled with delight at the fresh sight as Chris followed behind him.

"Huh, what's that?" Ein asked. "This magical tool expels water, right?"

In the corner of the room's lounge, there was a large crystal floating in the air above a small table.

"There seem to be glasses next to it. Ah, I see a circle at the front of the crystal. Perhaps you should place your glass in front of it," Chris guessed.

However, the crystal had no faucet or water tanks attached to it.

"I wonder," Ein murmured as he sat down on the sofa.

He must've been tired; the prince could feel himself relaxing as his body sank into the pillowy soft furniture.

Chris chuckled. "The long trip must have worn you out. Why don't I pour you a drink?"

"Thank you. Then I'd love a glass of water," Ein replied as he gazed at the mysterious floating crystal.

"Ah ha ha, I knew you'd say that."

Ein watched as the marshal approached the crystal; she was excitedly smiling, actually.

"Should I place this cup here and touch the crystal?" Chris mumbled.

There were no instructions, but she went with her gut. Then, at the very moment she touched the floating crystal...

"W-Water appeared out of nowhere!" Ein gasped.

"Indeed... This is amazing," Chris noted.

A sphere of water appeared above the glass and swiftly poured itself inside. Intrigued, Chris leaned in to grab the cup.

"Eek!" she cried, letting out a high-pitched, frail shriek.

"What's wrong?" Ein asked. "Was it too cold or something?"

"Ugh... How did you know? I was just a little shocked, is all."

"The cup's turning cloudy from the temperature, so I just assumed it was really cold." Ein happily chuckled. "It's nice to see you act like this every now and then."

"Sir Ein!"

Ein apologized as Chris puffed out her cheeks. Soon after, the prince's suggestion to grab some food made the pair decide it was

time for dinner. Ein was dying to flip through Oz's documents, but he needed to eat first. After their room service meal arrived, Ein and Chris enjoyed the delectable spread of dishes while sharing in some small talk.

Katima returned to the lodge just moments before midnight and immediately shut herself in her room. She nibbled on her room service meal while her eyes were glued to her recently purchased book. Meanwhile, Dill had already fallen asleep. Then, in the blink of an eye, several hours had passed—it was already four o'clock in the morning.

"Meow... I just don't get it," Katima wearily muttered.

"Don't get what? Why I'm still awake?" Ein replied.

"I understand why mew're up reading Professor Oz's documents. However, I don't understand why that klutz is taking a catnap on your lap."

"Mmm... Sleepy..." Chris murmured.

They were all sitting on the lounge's sofa while sifting through the documents.

"Chris has been like this for the past hour or so," Ein said.

Her steady breathing could be heard above his lap; the blonde marshal's sleeping face looked absolutely charming.

"It's been about two hours since I took out these documents, but I'm sure Chris is exhausted," Ein explained.

"I've never seen a member of the Knights Guard using the crown prince as a lap pillow, mew know. Meow? Wait, she's a marshal, isn't she?" Katima sighed and sat in front of Ein. "I suppose this is what a no-good older sister is like."

"Hm? Are you talking about yourself?"

From Olivia's point of view, Katima was her dear big sister who had a big personality to match.

"Are mew picking a fight me-ow?"

"I guess I *am* picking a fight with mew," Ein replied.

"Oh? Are mew picking up on my verbal mannerisms too? Goodness, I'd like to know who raised mew."

"You've been seeing her every day until yesterday."

It was late in the night and the two of them were too exhausted to think properly. Unfortunately, they couldn't stop themselves from escalating this exchange.

"Purrepare yourself!" Katima hissed as she pounced from the sofa.

"And not good enough," Ein replied, summoning his Phantom Hands.

Surely, the Dullahan didn't expect his skill to be used in such a

silly way, and Ein had never considered using it like this before either. Their brains were clearly rattled by late-night exhaustion as Ein caught Katima in midair.

“Th-That’s not fair!” Katima mewed.

“Sit down, okay? I won this exchange,” Ein replied, returning Katima to her seat with his Phantom Hands.

“Besides, what are mew making me do so late at night?” The first princess had run out of strength and proceeded to splay herself out on the sofa as a cat would. “Anyways, what’s written in the documents? Anything worthwhile?”

“Hm, it might be best if you scanned through them.”

“All right, hand them over... Mrow?!”

Katima’s tail stood straight up as she read the title of the document that had been put into her hands.

“Seems like they were doing some extreme experiments back then, don’t you think?”

“Well... I’ve heard a few rumors in the past, but meow...”

“It was shocking to read. I understand why Professor Oz said that these reports should’ve been destroyed.”

“I’d...like to believe that these clawful experiments are no longer happening.”

Katima took the stack of documents with both her paws and started to quietly but intently read through them. The title: *Experiments on Transforming Nonhumans into Monsters—How We’re Trying to Create a Man-Made Demon Lord*. In other words, this was a report concerning experimentation on sentient beings.

“Hm, I see. Then, nonhumans should be treated as monsters for their pawtential to become another Demon Lord. Mhm. I suppaws they were taking advantage of cores.”

“The experiments themselves appeared to be quite simple. They were trying to enlarge nonhuman cores by flooding them with magic stone energy. Apparently, the affected cores would experience a forced, but rapid, growth spurt.”

“That goes way beyond inflicting pain, my furr-end. If we were to consider the level of strain placed upon any one subject, it’s safe to say that most of them perished.”

“According to the report, 99.9 percent of them died.”

“Not surprising, but 99.9 percent, you say? So there *has* been a successful instance?” Katima stopped reading and looked up at Ein.

“It seems like they managed to morph someone into a formidable beast, but the researchers ended up eliminating their one-off success.”

“I see. I bet that the meownster went berserk and became too much for the researchers to handle.”

“There’s one thing that kept bugging me while I was reading

through these documents. Would you mind?"

"Not at all. Go on."

Ein gently stood up from the sofa and walked over to the floating crystal. As it had before, the tool glittered like a diamond before it conjured up a glob of water and dropped it into the boy's glass. With two full glasses in hand, Ein returned to his seat. He took a quick sip before he continued with his thought.

"I feel like I'm doing the exact same thing that's laid out in these reports. I'm absorbing magic stone energy, but without the excruciatingly painful side effects these subjects must have experienced."

Hence, his status card listed his job as "Named" with a handful of glitched letters strewn about. Ein was certain that this was the result of growing not as a person, but as a monster.

"Indeed," Katima replied with a nod as the lounge proceeded to take on a glum atmosphere. "Speaking of, are there any downsides to mew becoming a monster?"

Her quick question suddenly changed the grim mood in the room.

"Uh, maybe I wouldn't be able to communicate or something of the sort?" Ein wondered.

"That's a clawful misunderstanding mew have," she replied, smiling with her usual jovial grin. "It was written at the start of the report. 'Nonhuman' is a modern term, but if we go back in time, those same people were referred to as 'monsters.' It's a fact that we mustn't forget."

"R-Right, now that you mention it..."

"So even if mew *do* evolve into something else, Ein, you wouldn't be one of those small fry incapable of speech. Here's an example: think of the Dullahan. There's no question that he was a meownter, but there's no way the average passerby would be able to tell. Unless they knew, he'd be just another person. Same goes for the Elder Lich."

"R-Right..."

"And if mew ever do evolve into something new, we'll just register you as a new nonhuman species."

This seemed like a brash move. However, Ein was no longer sure as to why he was so worried about his supposed future transformation.

"But of course, it's not like you're totally free of purroblems! Never let your guard down."

"I know. Still, I feel a lot better."

"It's never good to overthink these situations, mew know. Relax a little."

"I feel relieved to hear that from you. And now, I need to use the bathroom. If you'll excuse me."

Ein gently raised Chris's head and placed a cushion under her before he left.

"Meow then," Katima said, fixing her posture as she stared straight at the marshal. "Chris, mew better not tell anyone about what mew've just heard. Not even my father."

"You knew I was awake," Chris muttered.

She'd been listening along the entire time.

"Mew woke up when Ein used his Phantom Hands, no? I'm sensitive about that kind of stuff."

"I...couldn't find the right time to wake up. And if His Majesty asks me, I feel I mustn't stay silent about this..."

"All right, then. No purroblem, this'll be simple."

Katima grabbed her glass and walked over to the floating crystal. As the marshal stared at the first princess from behind, it quickly became clear that the Cait-Sith's demeanor had changed. She turned around to reveal a divine expression on her face—one that Chris had never seen in all of her years serving the royal family. The marshal sat there stunned as Katima finally spoke.

"Christina Wernstein. Under the name of First Princess Katima von Ishtarica, I shall issue a royal edict. Among the information we receive from Ist, you must never speak of anything that relates to Ein possibly undergoing a monstrous metamorphosis. Additionally, I forbid you to speak about this matter with the royal family. I order you to never tell a soul."

While issuing her edict, Katima's behavior appeared to be a far cry from her usually laid-back demeanor. One must never forget that she was also a member of the royal family. Unable to refute her princess, Chris could only nod in reply.

"I'm glad that mew agreed so obediently. It's tiring to act so serious, mew know."

"I didn't think you'd use a royal edict," Chris murmured.

"I'm just doing what I can for my cheeky nephew. Besides, I'm pawsitive Ein's got a thing or two that he'd like to keep secret."

She let out a hearty laugh, seemingly returning to her normal self. Chris squeaked out a forced laugh in response, but the prince's approaching footsteps had the marshal scrambling to straighten up her messy bedhead.

"Worst case, history might repeat itself, I suppaws..." Katima muttered under her breath.

Even Chris was unable to make out a word of that.

"I'm back..." Ein said before noticing his knight. "Chris, you're awake."

"G-G-G-G-Good morning. Um, I apologize for inconveniencing you," the marshal hastily replied.

“Now, now. You don’t have to apologize *that* much!”

“Ein, Chris is embarrassed because she took a catnap on your lap,” the prince’s aunt said.

“You’re right, but you didn’t have to say it out loud!” Chris said.

As always, throwing these three into this same room made for a lively affair, and it seemed nothing changed that. Ein was planning to assist in the investigation tomorrow, but had decided to delay that until the evening. He was already sleep-deprived as it was. A few moments later, Dill emerged upon noticing how rowdy things had gotten in the lounge.

“Why don’t we all head to bed?” he suggested. The trio took the knight up on his suggestion and retired to their rooms.

Soon after Ein entered his bedroom, he rustled around in his pockets and dug out the message bird. The tool was giving off a pale-blue glow.

“She’s already replied,” Ein muttered, smiling.

He poured his magical energy into the message bird so he could listen to Krone’s voice.

“I’m glad you’ve arrived safely. When I told His Majesty and the others, they seemed to be just as relieved as I was. Will my message arrive at night, I wonder? I’m sorry if I woke you up. Oh, and take care not to catch a cold, all right? You know I’m not there to nurse you back to health again. Good night for now. If you ever have the time to contact me again, I’ll be waiting.”

After Ein heard Krone’s voice, he seemed to be in an absent-minded stupor for a short while. How could he express his feelings? Krone’s message was true to her character—displaying a touch of innocence while making her concern for his well-being quite clear. Ein’s chest grew warm. He did everything he could to fight back the urge to immediately send a reply—the message bird could only make a few more trips before it could no longer be used.

Ein tucked himself into bed and repeated Krone’s words in his mind before his consciousness slipped away.

After peeling himself out of bed, Ein walked around with Chris just before lunchtime. However, Dill was off elsewhere, as he was keeping tabs on Katima.

“It’s so lively,” Ein said with awe as he walked along the main street.

Swarms of tourists could be seen crowding around the many stores that lined the street. In fact, the variety of shops was comparable to that of the royal capital, and the wares sold within these establishments had captured Ein’s curiosity.

“It’s a waste that we can’t see inside the store,” Ein remarked as he gently knocked on the wall in front of him. This store appeared to be closed off by opaque white walls. “Huh?!”

Suddenly, the walls had taken on the transparent qualities of glass.

Chris chuckled. “That’s a magical tool too.”

“I didn’t think Ist’s technology would be utilized here.”

Once Ein drew his hand away from the wall, it turned opaque again after a few seconds. When he placed his hand on the wall once more, he could see the inside of the store. The crown prince was stunned, repeating this action over and over again.

“Sir Ein, you’re fooling around a bit too much...” Chris warned.

“Sorry, I was just amazed by these tools.”

“This specific tool might be difficult to properly use. Seems to have a niche purpose.”

“We should’ve lined Katima’s walls with it to catch her off guard.”

“You mustn’t.” Chris gave a faint smile. “As mischievous as always... In any case, I wonder what Lady Katima is up to.”

“You get that Dill’s the sacrifice, right?”

Dill was traveling with Katima, but he was acting more as a bag boy than as a bodyguard. There was a good chance he had his hands full while watching after the princess.

“As a guard myself, I’m a bit worried about Lady Katima traveling on her own,” Chris said.

“I get what you’re saying,” Ein replied. But Katima was a free spirit, and that bit couldn’t be helped. “Why don’t we head off in that direction? There seem to be a lot of stores with a good number of people around and about. We might be able to learn something about the kidnappings.”

Ein’s eye had been caught by a road a little ways off from the city’s main drag. While not as populated as the main thoroughfare, Chris nodded in approval of her prince’s suggestion. The pair walked down a small alley that was far from abandoned. As they enjoyed the city’s sights, Ein was focused on finding any leads he could find about the abductions.

However, a two-person investigation wasn’t going to be a walk in the park. Neither marshal nor prince could sniff out a trace of the kidnappings. As the sky continued to grow darker, Ein had decided to make a defiant statement while standing in the middle of a tight alley.

“Can I make an excuse?” Ein asked.

“Go right ahead,” Chris replied.

“It gets so confusing when you walk into Ist’s alleys: there’s twists and turns all over! Without a clear view of the Tower of Wisdom, I’ve lost my sense of direction.”

“It is indeed a unique work of architecture, but I must ask: why did you walk down this narrow path? I guess it’s my fault for not stopping you... Then again, I feel like you pull me along these days. I suppose I must be a failure of a guard.”

“N-Not at all... Sorry...”

The pair had entered a path that was more like the space between two houses than a road. Chris could easily have jumped to a rooftop to catch the lay of the land, but she didn’t want to draw attention to herself.

“I just can’t deny that partway through, this became more of an exploratory mission,” Ein admitted.

“Goodness... I understand. Once we return to our lodge, Dill and I will have to see who’s been more at the whim of our master’s wishes,” Chris replied.

The crown prince walked on without a care in the world, along with the inability to rebuke his marshal’s claims.

“There were a lot of knights on the main street, but there doesn’t seem to be any around here,” Ein observed.

“I’m guessing that these alleyways aren’t part of their rounds. People usually aren’t walking around here.”

Ein fell silent and turned away at Chris’s biting remarks.

“Oh, but look,” Ein pointed out. “There’s someone running our way, so maybe we can ask for directions.”

The prince noticed a figure quickly approaching him. However, the person seemed to be running in a hurry, causing Ein and Chris to grow tense.

“Chris...” Ein muttered.

“The person seems to be fleeing from something,” Chris replied, unsheathing her rapier.

A barefoot girl approached the pair, her cheeks dirtied with soot. She was wearing thin, raggedy clothes that barely covered her body, and didn’t seem to be just another commoner. She was malnourished, but appeared to be about fifteen years or so of age.

“Hah... Hah...” she panted, out of breath.

Ein heard her rough breathing before he noticed a mob chasing after her.

“Are those hired men adventurers?” Chris wondered.

“Seems like it. And that girl’s being chased,” Ein replied.

“No matter the reason, we can’t let this be. Sir Ein, please stand behind me.”

“All right.”

The girl was quickly approaching the pair. “Help! Please! Please help me!” she cried upon noticing them.

The men chasing after her also noticed the duo’s presence.

“Hey, what’ll we do?” a man asked.

“No idea. Just take ’em too.”

Ein widened his eyes with shock when he heard the man’s gruff words.

“Could this be? Is this what I think it is?” Ein gasped.

“It’s a coincidence, all right? We just happened to get lost! We didn’t run into them on purpose!” Chris replied.

“I know, but I’m just saying we got lucky.”

It was clear to Ein that these men were somehow involved in the kidnapping. Chris was under the same impression, intending to take the men alive.

“Since that’s decided, we shouldn’t stay here for long,” the marshal said.

A gust of wind blew through the area as Chris disappeared from view.

“She’s really so fast. I can’t see her at all,” Ein murmured.

In a flash, the men were lying face down on the ground. One was bleeding slightly and another held a blade that was cleanly sliced in two. The young girl was thrown into a state of shock as Chris suddenly appeared before her.

“Are you all right? We’re...” Chris started, hoping to calm the girl by exposing her identity.

“Ugh...” the girl murmured.

Perhaps she was relieved, or maybe Chris’s fancy feat had left her stunned, but the girl immediately fainted. The marshal hastily moved to support the girl before looking at the prince with a concerned expression on her face.

“Uh, what?” Chris mumbled, confused.

“I know one thing for sure,” Ein replied.

“A-And what would that be?”

“We can’t ask that girl for directions.”

The prince’s curiosity had thrown the pair into this pickle to begin with. However, that same curiosity had led him to a few leads. Chris let out a long sigh as she gently carried the girl on her back; other knights would come back for the goons. Chris and Ein glanced at each other before leaving the small alleyway.

It took the pair a little while to find their way, but they eventually made it back out to Ist’s main street. Chris commanded a few nearby guards to capture the knocked-out goons. The guards were slow to get going at first, but they scrambled to action once the marshal flashed her status card. The girl was taken back to the lodge and placed in an open bed. She woke up a few hours later, just before midnight.

“Where am...” the girl murmured as she slowly regained consciousness.

“Ah, are mew awake?”

“And you are...?!”

“We can talk later. Furr now... Hey, everyone! She’s awake!”

Ein and Chris soon came into the room. The marshal carried in a tray of food as the first princess proceeded to rub her sleepy eyes and walk out.

“You must be hungry,” Ein gently said. “Why don’t you have a bite to eat?”

A single tear rolled down the girl’s cheek as she noticed the steaming plate of food on the tray, not to mention the meal’s enticing aroma. She quickly wiped her face with her dirty clothes.

“Are you sure?” she asked. “Am I really allowed to eat?”

“Of course. We prepared this for you,” the crown prince replied.

“Thank you...”

“You can take all the time you need. There’s no rush.”

After taking the tray from Chris, the girl wrapped her frail, bony fingers around a fork. She manipulated her hands in an awkward fashion as she slowly chewed her meal. It must’ve been a while since she had a hot meal; the poor thing continued to sob while stuffing her face.

She must be an orphan from the slums... Ein thought. Her tattered clothes and unbathed appearance made that clear to him. Katima had already made that deduction from a single glance at her.

When she finished her meal a few minutes later, a bit of color started to return to her cheeks. With a gasp, she bowed her head.

“Thank you so much for providing a luxurious meal to someone such as myself. I cannot express my gratitude enough to you all,” she said.

“No worries, but there’s one thing I’d like to ask,” Ein replied.

“Is it about the men who were chasing me?”

“That’s right. Why were they after you?”

“I don’t know. When I returned to my house... Well, I’m not sure if you can call it one though, since it’s just a small, shabby shack... But anyway, my younger sister was supposed to be waiting for me, but she’d disappeared. Instead, those men were in her place.”

Ein glanced at Chris, who calmly and gently leaned over to ask the girl a follow-up question.

“Pardon me for asking this, but do you know where your younger sister currently is?”

“I-I don’t!” the girl cried. “She must’ve been taken somewhere...and I almost met the same fate!”

“Thank you for talking with us,” Ein replied. “I understand what’s

going on.”

The girl had simply fled with everything she could, hoping to evade capture. Ein clenched his fists in anger, his nails digging into his palms.

“Please! You’ve already treated me with such kindness and I know it’s rude to ask for more, but I’m begging you!” the girl pleaded.

“We’ve been chasing after those men, you see,” Ein replied. “Don’t worry. We’ll save your younger sister too.”

Even though tears and snot dribbled down the girl’s face, she looked relieved when she heard Ein’s reassuring words. The two parties knew nothing of each other, not even names. However, there was no time to be chatting away so idly.

“You should rest for a while longer. If you don’t mind, I’d like to hear more about you and your affairs tomorrow,” Chris kindly said as she offered a cup of tea.

The girl gingerly reached out for the cup, took a sip, then another, and quickly swallowed. “Thank you so much,” she murmured.

Ein stood up. “We’ll leave some more drinks and a light meal or two for you. Feel free to take a bath for as long as you’d like. Please rest for a little while, and we’ll return in the morning. You can take it easy.”

The girl smiled as Ein and Chris left the room.

That reminds me... A single question appeared in Ein’s mind. The girl had the appearance of an orphan from the slums, but she seemed to be rather intelligent and well educated. For now it wasn’t a pressing issue, and he quietly made his way back to the lounge.

Moments later, Ein heard a knock on the lounge door. After he gave a reply, a knight entered.

“I’m back,” Dill said wearily.

“Welcome back. How did the interrogation go?” Ein asked.

“I have a few matters that I could report on. Over here, please.”

He took out an envelope from his chest pocket and handed it to Ein. The prince immediately opened it up and scanned the document within.

“I guess things won’t be that easy,” the prince muttered.

Ein had hoped to find the mastermind behind the kidnappings, but the answers weren’t going to fall into his lap. On the bright side, he did learn some useful information. The goons would take their victims to the slum’s outskirts. Women especially could be sold for a pretty penny, with little girls becoming the most popular targets as of late. However, the most interesting tidbit happened to be that...

“They saw one of the carriages they sold the kids to heading towards the Tower of Wisdom...” Ein murmured.

A cavalcade of middlemen would normally be used to cover the

traffickers' tracks, but these goons had just happened to witness the carriage carrying the children.

"Things are really starting to become fishy," Ein said.

He hadn't expected the tower to come up in his investigation. How was Ist's main structural institution involved in the kidnappings? What was going on within this seemingly cheerful city? This series of unexpected events had brought Ein to his wits' end.

First thing the next morning, Ein and Chris headed straight for the local knights' station. They were hoping to get a little bit of extra info out of the goons. On their way back to the lodge, the prince had decided to make a stop at a nearby café.

"It's not as though they're keeping quiet. I think they're truly clueless," Chris remarked after finishing her sandwich.

Ein had polished off his meal as well and was in the middle of gulping down his glass of juice. The café's surroundings were busy, as it was close to a popular tourist spot. In contrast to the stillness of the royal duo, the sound of laughter and chatter erupted around them.

"Sir Ein. Sir Ein," Chris called.

"Hm? What is it?"

"You seem to have a few thoughts of your own, but I think it's best to leave the rest to the proper personnel."

"Right..."

There was no need for the crown prince to personally stick his nose into this mess. Since an institution as influential as the Tower of Wisdom was involved, Ein knew that it was best to let Warren handle the rest. However...

"I haven't forgotten my position, and I did come here for information on the foxes, but..." Ein said. "It just doesn't feel right."

"You're very valiant. As one who has served by your side, I know that more than anyone," Chris assured.

"That makes me feel a little embarrassed, but...okay."

He'd been able to spare a young lady from her almost-assured doom; that was more than enough. He wasn't a central, irreplaceable figure in the investigation either. Unlike the Sea Dragon incident, this problem could be solved with a mobilized platoon of knights.

"I know!" Chris exclaimed. "Since we have the chance, why don't we change things up a bit?"

"Uh, 'change things up?'" Ein asked.

"Yes! Now that I think about it, I believe that we haven't done anything too touristy while we've been here in Ist."

"We haven't received a call from Professor Oz yet, so I guess we can have a bit of fun."

“No one will complain if you take a short break while you wait for him to get back to you. Hm, let’s see... For example, why don’t we take a stroll to the Monster Arena?”

Ein jolted as his eyebrows soared. “What kind of place is that? Does Ist have something magnificent like that?”

“Heh heh, they do! Ist is famous for it!” With a laugh, Chris stood up and extended her hand to him.

“Where is it?!”

Excited, Ein took her hand and allowed himself to be guided along. Their difference in height was decreasing by the day, and their faces were closer to each other than expected. For a moment, Chris shifted her gaze out of embarrassment.

“A-Ahem!” she coughed. “The arena is right past this road, so why don’t we head over to it?”

“I’d love to!” Ein gushed.

The pair happily strolled down the road, with Ein sporting quite the bit of pep in his step. Despite the gloomy news he’d been given over the past few days, he was eager to maybe have a little fun at the Monster Arena.

Several minutes later, the crown prince’s eyes glimmered as he approached an exquisite view accented by the cheering of an excited crowd. The boy gasped in surprise upon reaching the clearing—many kinds of monsters were neatly arranged on the stone pavement in front of him. The beast’s owner stood beside them to ensure nothing would go awry.

“Wow, this is amazing!” Ein exclaimed.

“There’s so many monsters,” Chris noted. “Bisons, slimes...and look! There’s a wyvern!”

Referring to the beast as a “pseudodragon” didn’t do the reptile justice. The wyvern was an enormous winged creature—a dragon in everything but name. Even though Ein had gone toe-to-toe with the colossal Sea Dragon, he still wasn’t able to hide his excitement.

“Over there! There!” Chris said as she leaned into Ein’s face and pointed at the monster.

The magnificent beast filled his view.

“Yeah, amazing... So that’s a wyvern...” the prince murmured.

“Since wyverns are named after the color of their scales, I believe that’s the Green Wyvern. A single wyvern usually requires about 1,000,000 G a month just to keep it fed,” Chris explained.

“Oh, that’s a stone I’ve bought from Majorica! It tasted awful!”

“Th-That’s how you remember it? That’s a little...”

But it definitely left a lasting impression. Ein gazed at the Green Wyvern’s lithe, snakelike body. The beast was covered in thin scales and the veins of its bat-like wings regularly pulsed. At the end of

each of its thin limbs were three large talons, always ready to strike.

"It's a lot smaller than I thought it would be," Ein noted. "It's about the size of a horse-drawn carriage, I think."

"Indeed. There *are* larger varieties, but their scales are differently colored usually. For example..." Chris said as she put her slender finger to her glossy lips, accentuating her beauty. As her finger pushed her lips upwards ever so slightly, it made it quite easy to tell just how stunning she was. "Oh, over there!"

The marshal proceeded to point at a monster that dwarfed the Green Wyvern.

"It's unusually big. It feels like a totally different species," Ein said.

He was staring at a massive, red-scaled wyvern. With the bulging muscles that adorned its frame and limbs, this beast appeared to be way burlier than the green variant. When the wyvern spread its wings, Ein wasn't able to tear his eyes away—it appeared to be the size of a two-story house.

Equipped with a sharp gaze of its own, the Red Wyvern's very presence caused the surrounding monsters to screech in terror. The humongous drake's proud display of aggression made it look like it owned the place, and lent it the appearance of an easily excitable brute.

"Would you like to get a closer look? I'm sure it's safe if you don't stick your hand out," Chris said.

Guided by Chris, the pair approached the red beast while it was drawing the crowd's attention.

"Grrr?" the red wyvern growled.

Standing about ten meters away from the beast, Ein found himself letting out a gasp in awe of it. He soon locked eyes with the wyvern, prompting it to immediately freeze before inching back away from the boy.

"Uh, is it running from me?" Ein asked.

"Indeed, it seems that way," Chris replied.

But why? Ein had no idea. He didn't *think* that he'd done anything to it; he'd simply walked up to it.

"Ah, maybe..." Chris said before clapping her hands together. "Your status card lists you as 'Named,' doesn't it? Maybe the wyvern senses the Sea Dragon's power within you and naturally fears you given that."

"Makes sense. I feel like you've hit the nail on the head."

"Ah ha ha... I'm feeling a touch bad for this monster. Why don't we step back?"

The voices of the crowd rang out as Ein obediently went along with Chris's suggestion.

“That’s a magnificent wyvern!”

“I would expect no less from Viscount Sage. I’m dying to know how he raised the beast.”

“Indeed. I’ve never seen such a muscular wyvern.”

This wyvern was certainly splendid enough to earn the praise of others, but the name attached to the creature bothered Ein; his cheek twitched on reflex.

“Chris, did you hear that?” he asked.

“Indeed... That is quite an unfortunate tidbit to learn.”

Ein frowned, as the very same man had caused a ruckus at the lodge a few days back. The wyvern was no doubt magnificent, but the mention of Sage’s name kept the boy from appreciating the monster in all its glory.

With exquisitely unfortunate timing, Viscount Sage appeared and made his way to his beast.

“It seems everyone is envious of my wyvern,” he haughtily huffed.

“Among the wyverns you own, viscount, this one is undoubtedly the best. I’m not surprised,” a knight commented.

A group of knights emerged—the same group that Ein had seen before.

“I’m sure I’ll be victorious once again in today’s competition,” Sage sneered. “And again my wallet will grow thicker... Hm? Is it nervous? That’s unusual. Good grief, don’t look so pathetic for god’s sake!”

The viscount took out a whip and swung it down at the wyvern’s feet.

“Graaar!” the monster cried.

“Look sharp and spirited! Just how much money do you think I’ve spent on you?!” Sage bellowed.

The viscount cracked his whip several more times, but the wyvern’s drive didn’t return. The crowd was stunned to see the wyvern offer no resistance, a sign it had been well trained. However, Ein felt pangs of guilt knowing that he was the cause of the beast’s current timidity.

“Hah... Hah...” Viscount Sage panted. “Were you drugged or something?”

“There’s a good possibility of that, viscount,” a knight said.

“It’s odd to see it look so terrified. There must be someone suspicious nearby...” another said.

Only monsters, beast owners, trainers, and the audience were present at the arena. Needless to say, Ein and Chris stood out like a pair of sore thumbs in their dark robes.

“I have a bad feeling about this...” Ein muttered.

“What a coincidence. So do I,” Chris answered.

“If we leave, it’ll look like we’re fleeing and will only make matters worse.”

“I agree.”

And their ominous hunches had been proved correct as Sage approached Ein.

“Who are you lot?!” the viscount demanded. “It seems that you’ve been eyeing my wyvern for a while now.”

“Indeed, but we were just looking. Nothing more,” Chris replied.

“How can I trust that? You hide your faces; there’s no doubt in my mind that there’s a reason for your shadiness. Someone, rip off their hoods.”

“Then allow me,” one of the viscount’s knights said, approaching Ein.

The knight outstretched their hand to pull off the boy’s hood, but Chris immediately stepped in.

“You may not,” the marshal said.

As she put herself between her prince and the knight, her hood flicked itself off. For a brief moment, her divine golden locks shimmered in the sunlight. Her beauty was obvious for all to see.

“Ugh,” Chris said as she quickly pulled up her hood.

It was only for a split second, but that was all it took for Sage’s vulgar thoughts and desires to rear their heads.

“Why don’t we head over to my lodge to...*talk*?” the viscount suggested.

With plump fingers born from a life in the lap of luxury, the man reached to grab Chris’s arm.

“Stop that,” Ein said. He was covering for her this time.

“How insolent of you to speak. Do you know who I am?” Sage demanded.

“She’s very important to me,” Ein replied. “You may not lay a finger on her.”

The bite and domineering tone behind Ein’s statement caused the viscount to nervously gulp. Sage only knew that they were mysterious adventures, yet he felt as if he were at the feet of a monster that exuded an overwhelming pressure. Looking at the robed adventurer, his height made it obvious that he was just a boy. However, a sense of dread washed over the viscount, as if he’d been thrown into the terrifying crevices of a monster’s nest.

“I’ll say it once more,” Ein said. “We were just looking, and nothing more.”

His words implied that the viscount should quietly withdraw, and Sage inadvertently nodded in agreement.

“You truly are an insolent child who knows no manners,” Sage said. “But I shall overlook your reckless behavior for today.”

“Viscount?! What shall we do about the tournament?” a knight asked.

“I don’t care! If my wyvern is useless, then there’s nothing I can do! Tell the arena manager to cage my wyvern!”

The viscount turned around and took wide strides away from Ein. The crowd was stunned by the exchange, watching on as the viscount’s knight hastily chased after him. After letting out a sigh, Ein took Chris’s hand and tugged her along.

“Sir Ein?!” she gasped.

“Let’s leave for today. We properly met that braggart too,” the prince replied.

“I-I understand, but my hand! You’re clutching my hand!”

“I don’t mind. Let’s just leave here as soon as we can.”

“I-I-I mind!”

Ein swiftly walked ahead, dragging Chris behind him. Although she couldn’t offer any resistance against him, the marshal felt a bit of joy from being pulled along by him. As he trudged forward, the prince was unable to mask his frustration with the viscount’s behavior.

“Aristocrats are supposed to lead the citizens. Why’s that nouveau riche guy...” Ein mumbled before he stopped himself. “Wait, ‘nouveau riche?’ That doesn’t make sense.”

“Um, Sir Ein?” the marshal asked.

“E-Er, sorry. I was just a bit bothered by something.”

Letting go of the elf’s hand, Ein slowed his pace as he cooled his head. While the marshal was wistfully staring at his open hand, the prince had a thought.

“I have a question,” Ein said. “Didn’t you say that the viscount wasn’t doing very well financially? They shouldn’t have much money, then. If that’s the case, how is he able to raise his wyverns and krakens?”

The sudden question had Chris blinking and shaking her head before her expression turned serious. “To be honest, I’ve been thinking about that as well.”

“Right, so it is odd, then.”

The elf quizzically cocked her head to the side while Ein gazed into the distance. He was so wrapped up in his thoughts that the noise of the outside world was blocked out of his mind. Then it all came back after a thought hit him.

“Do you receive a reward for winning one of the Monster Arena’s tournaments?” Ein asked.

“You must mean the prize money. Yes, I believe you should earn a few million gold.”

But that alone wasn’t enough to feed and raise such a monstrous menagerie—especially the beasts that boasted impressive statures.

Given their smaller size, I bet he has a kraken stored nearby. Could a noble house with dwindling funds afford such a luxury? He was still an aristocrat, after all; he might have been able to pull a few strings to get the necessary money. Ein furrowed his brows. *Maybe I'm overthinking this.*

"But it still bothers me," he mumbled.

Suddenly, droplets of water started to fall onto the stone pavement.

"It's starting to rain. I've got a folding umbrella," Chris said.

"Ah, thanks."

The two walked along while the marshal held up her umbrella. While listening to the pitter-patter of the rain hitting the umbrella, Ein looked to the gray sky above.

"What is that? An aurora?" he asked.

Within that gray sky was a beautiful aurora that looked over Ist. It was a fresh sight for the boy, Ein couldn't help but reach out to try and grab it.



“It’s generated by a huge tool that resides in the Tower of Wisdom,” Chris explained as she gazed at the monolithic structure. “I’m not quite sure of the mechanism’s intricacies, but I’ve heard that it can automatically create a man-made aurora even on cloudy days.”

“Huh... That seems useless but amazing.”

While staring at the fantastical lights that spewed forth from the tower, Ein could see the colors occasionally flickering from blue to purple as the aurora floated above the city. He soon stopped in his tracks before redirecting his gaze at the tower.

“The Tower of Wisdom...” he mumbled. Were the snatched kids taken there? He was tempted to use an edict to force an investigation. “Hm?”

As he tried to connect his thoughts, the pieces of the puzzle started to click together.

“Kidnapping children is great for profit...” he muttered.

“Sir Ein? Is anything the matter?” Chris asked.

“Um, Chris, could you see if Viscount Sage has an office in the Tower of Wisdom? I’d like that info immediately.”

Surprise danced across the elf’s face for a moment before she gave her reply. “There’s no need for me to look into that. The previous Viscount was a respectable man who passed the eligibility screening with no problems. Their wealth has been approved as well, so I’m sure that Viscount Sage continues to hold an office there.” Suddenly, the realization hit Chris. “Sir Ein, you don’t mean...”

“I’m sure you’ve caught on, but Sage is a material witness to this case.”

Sage seemed to be doing quite well for himself, and that carriage full of kids headed for the tower appeared to be quite telling. He wasn’t a definite suspect just yet, but it was clear that he most likely knew something. The prince proceeded to thank the rain and that aurora for his epiphany.

Katima only had praise for the tower’s high level of security. The building had been Ist’s core for a long time now, and as such, one could only step inside after following the proper procedures. It was a virtual fortress.

After being given another once-over on the tower from his aunt, the prince found himself locked deep in thought. With their information well guarded and a vigilant security team, it wasn’t an overstatement when one said that these measures allowed the tower’s staff to continue innovating in new technology.

Ein stepped out onto the balcony and gazed up at the crimson sky.

“Could I use an edict to forcibly enter the building?” he asked Katima.

“Mew can, but what if they destroy the necessary infurrmation?”

“Ah, you’re right...”

“If any evidence was incinerated and the ashes disposed of, it would mean you inappropriately issued an edict.”

Ein needed to avoid that scenario, but how else was he going to get into the Tower of Wisdom?

“Mew can’t call on their inspection team either. I guarantee that any evidence would be disposed of before mew could even get to the viscount’s office.”

The fifty-story tower would take some time to maneuver around, even with its elevator.

“If mew’re gonna use an edict why not just call out Viscount Sage?”

“Ah, are you telling me to capture him and cut him off from outside help?” Ein asked.

“Meow.”

“But it seems like there are many middlemen involved in this trafficking ring. Also, I have a feeling that the viscount is a fairly wary man. He might have a backup plan.”

“Mew have a point there. I guess mew just have to scurry about and sneak right in.”

“But I don’t know if I could do that.”

“Then mew’ve got a lot of obstacles in your path.”

Even though it could be seen from the lodge’s balcony, the tower felt so close yet so foreign and closed off from the rest of the city—as if it were a world of its own. Ein was at a loss on what to do.

“Well, it’s not like mew *can’t* sneak in though,” Katima said with a smirk. “Mew remember what I said when we walked into town, right? The building is totally reliant on an old furnace.”

“Ah yes, I remember that...but how does that relate to this?”

“Oh, it relates greatly, my dear nephew! Why don’t we step back inside? I’ve got something good to show mew.”

His face brimming with hope, Ein chased his aunt back to the lounge. The pair sat down on the sofa right after the Cait-Sith had fetched a small notebook from her room.

“These are the little things I’ve noticed while I’ve been at work,” Katima said. She opened the book and pointed to a page covered in neatly drawn illustrations. “This is highly confidential infurrmation. These are full schematics for the mechanism within the tower’s basement furnace.”

“I see that there are a few tubes that go from a round pool in the basement and all the way to the top of the tower,” Ein observed. “The

tubes appear to branch off on each floor.”

“Are mew still a little confused? Again, think back to what I said when you first saw the tower.”

The Tower of Wisdom was completely reliant on this ancient furnace. From looking at the schematics, the sole furnace was responsible for providing energy to the rest of the tower, akin to the single heart humans rely on to pump blood throughout their bodies.

“And how’s the tower’s security?” Ein asked.

“I looked into that too. Just as the energy produced gathers in the basement, so do the guards,” Katima replied.

Ein realized the intent behind his aunt’s words. “In other words...that furnace is the key.”

“Correct! Mew should...”

“Break the furnace!”

“Don’t be a fool,” Katima wearily replied. “Just how much do mew think it’d cost in damages? The number would be through the roof! Astronomical!” She pointed to one of her illustrations. “See here.”

The impressively large pool almost covered the entirety of the basement’s footprint and appeared to house some sort of liquid. There appeared to be a large mechanism in the middle of the pool that seemed to shoot up towards the surface alongside many pipes.

“That’s where magic stones are melted, stored, then stirred together by a large mixer.”

“What does mixing it do?” Ein asked.

“It creates a massive amount of magical energy, mew see. The created energy will then require a turbine, like the one in the center, which then converts that into energy for the tower. In other words, if you stop the turbine, you stop the flow of energy throughout the tower.” She was pointing at the mechanism in the center of the pool.

“I see,” Ein replied. “But how can we stop the turbine?”

“Well, I don’t know. That’s something that mew must figure out for me-ow.”

Katima always got stuck at the most important bits. Ein proceeded to fold his arms in front of him.

“Does it have a safety mechanism or something of the sort?” he asked.

“To overheat the turbine, you’d need to create a meowssive amount of magical energy. The only method I can think of is to stir the liquefied magic stones at a rapid pace.”

“So I’ll just have to speed up the mixer.”

“Meow, well, mew’re not wrong...” she replied with a dry smile as she scratched her cheek. “But I have a feeling that the safety mechanism would activate before the turbine had the chance to

overheat.”

And once again, Ein had hit a wall. Then what was he to do?

“Hmm...then I can only stir the liquefied stone by hand in that case...” Ein muttered.

It appeared to be an impossible feat; stirring such a large pool required the might of an underwater monster.

“A monster... A monster that lives in the water...” Ein mumbled; an idea was starting to brew in his mind.

Should he use the Dullahan’s power? No, that would simply destroy the mechanism. How about the Elder Lich’s? He wasn’t even sure what spells and abilities she had at her disposal; it wasn’t a wise idea to rely on her mysterious powers just yet. After thinking long and hard about it, a plan had finally popped into his head.

“That’s it. I’ve got a way to stir up those stones,” Ein said.

He hadn’t had use for this skill until now, but there was no doubt in his mind that this one fit the bill. Ein had finally started to find a ray of hope in this situation. The boy soon flashed his pearly whites as a grin started to form on his lips.

“The only thing left is how we actually get to the furnace,” Ein said. “Do you have any ideas?”

“Wait just one second! What are mew thinking of doing?”

“I’ll explain later. But first...”

As Ein appeared to have an idea in his head, Katima spoke up. “Mrow... Maybe mew should ask the Agustos Trading Firm for a hand. You know what I’m getting at, don’t mew?”

“I do, but couldn’t I just sneak in and head to the top of the tower from there?”

“There are different routes into the basement and research facility.”

Ein nodded in agreement.

“If mew try to force your way in, mew’ll trigger the alarm... And if mew use the upper floor elevator, mew’ll be caught right away. The aristocratic offices tend to start on the twentieth floor and go up from there.”

“Got it. Then I’ll just ask Graff Agustos.” The prince stood up with gusto. “Once Chris is out of the bath, we’ll head to his location and ask for his cooperation.”

The determination brimming within him was like that of his encounter with the Sea Dragon. Thanks to that confident bravado about him, Ein appeared to be more reliable than he had ever been before.

Several minutes later, the freshly bathed Chris was so charming to the boy’s eye that he could barely recognize her. Her rosy cheeks were no longer covered in sweat, and her usual ponytail was nowhere to be

seen: in fact, her golden locks flowed freely. The marshal was so beautiful that she didn't even need makeup.

When she heard Ein's story, Chris was predictably against it.

"I shall figure something out," the elf insisted. "I won't let you go anywhere, Sir Ein."

"I thought you'd say that," Ein grumbled.

"Of course I would! Good grief!"

The marshal would've let this slide if this were just an elaborate joke, but she knew that the crown prince wasn't one for kidding in situations such as this.

"Besides, shouldn't I just sneak in on my own?" Chris suggested.

"Uh, well, I can't argue when you say that. Ugh..."

"You cannot! I won't let you go!"

They were at a standstill.

"Now, now, why don't the two of mew calm down?" Katima said. "Speaking of, I heard from Ein that you saw a burly eye-catcher of a wyvern. Is that true, Chris?"

"I-Indeed," the marshal replied. "It's not the kind of thing I'm used to seeing... Its muscles bulged so...unnaturally."

Chris appeared to be perplexed by the princess's question, but Katima only gave a knowing grin.

"I see, I see... Unnatural, eh?" the first princess said.

She was clearly planning something. From all the time he'd spent with her, Ein knew the look on his aunt's face quite well. In fact, they'd even cooked up a plan or two together in the past. The boy was trying his best to figure out what she was up to.

An unnatural wyvern... His mind came back to why he was Ist to begin with—his health, information on the red foxes, and...

"Ah, I see. Majorica did say something like that," Ein said.

Red foxes had the power to enhance and manipulate monsters.

"Sir Ein? What's wrong?" Chris asked as her cheeks twitched.

That's it! Ein finally took his aunt's hint—she was trying to help him. He glanced at her, took a deep breath, and proceeded to open his mouth.

Chapter Six: I Think I'm the First Crown Prince to Go Undercover

In sharp contrast to Ist, there wasn't a cloud to be seen in the royal capital's night sky. A pair of ladies was rounding a corner in the aristocratic district, the gazes of nearby gentlemen firmly locked on them.

"Lady Olivia, thank you so much for today," Krone said.

The heiress apparent to the massive Agustos Trading Firm was clad in a gray cardigan atop a white dress that went down to just above her knees. The ensemble was capped off with the sparkling star crystal that adorned her right hand. Krone's attire wasn't flowery, but the fluttering of her luscious hair in the breeze enveloped her in a floral scent. The girl's appeal was so great that even simple garments were well tailored to her.

"Thanks to you, I had such a wonderful day," Krone said.

Olivia smiled graciously in response to the girl's words. "I'm so glad you had fun, Krone."

The pair had left the castle before sunset and headed into the castle district with members of the Knights Guard in tow. The ladies had visited a few clothing and accessory shops that Olivia tended to frequent.

"I hope we can do this again," Olivia said.

The second princess was dressed in a tight, dark-blue dress that exposed her shoulders. She had a white shawl around her, hiding a bit of her otherwise exposed cleavage. Her chest was adorned with the star crystal Ein had given her.



“Lady Olivia,” Krone started.

“Hm? What is it?”

“To tell you the truth, I just received a message bird from Ein. He said that there’s something he needs to do in Ist and he needs my grandfather’s help. I was planning to reply once we return to the castle...”

“Oh my, Ein’s asking Graff for assistance?”

“I wonder what he’s up to this time... Goodness...”

Krone seemed to be a tad displeased, but far from glum. Olivia’s face broke out into a strained smile, most likely because she was unable to put a stop to her son’s reckless acts.

“Are you not worried, Lady Olivia?” Krone asked.

“I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t,” the second princess replied. “But I believe that Ein will be all right. You think the same, don’t you?”

“I do.”

“Chris is by his side as well. If she deems it safe, I’m sure it will be.”

“I’m a little—no, I’m *very* envious of Chris.” Krone looked up at the sky as she gracefully walked along. “I’d like to go with Ein as well. Even if he has important matters to tend to, I want to be at his side.”

“Because you love him,” Olivia whispered quietly.

“Pardon? Did you say something, Lady Olivia?”

The second princess chuckled. “Oh, it’s nothing. Nothing at all. But...”

Olivia looked at the necklace hanging over Krone’s chest, a simple piece of jewelry adorned with a single black pearl.

“You’ve been wearing that necklace quite a bit as of late. Is it one of your favorites?” Olivia asked.

“Uh, yes, I suppose...” Krone said, acting uncharacteristically awkward.

Olivia tilted her head to the side in confusion. Since it was just a passing thought, she didn’t press the issue further, but Krone gently put her hand to her chest.

She looked up at the sky and whispered in a faint voice, “It feels like he’s putting a collar around me, and I like it... But how could I say such a thing?”

Despite the royal family’s preference for silver and white, Krone felt that black suited Ein very well. Only she knew the true reason as to why she wore the black pearl necklace.

“Ah, this morning, I told the twins that Ein would be coming home soon,” Krone said with a smile. “Then they started crying with joy.”

“Those babies seem to understand the human language,” Olivia

said. "Before you know it, they might go fetch Ein themselves."

"Oh, Lady Olivia!"

The two looked at each other and gracefully laughed. The two proceeded to make their way back to the castle, still attracting the eyes of many.

While staying at the castle that evening, Krone planned to send a reply to Ein before she went to bed. She was lying on the bed in her private quarters, located on the same floor as the prince's room. The young lady was trying to think of a reply, but she couldn't find the right words; her beloved's face kept flashing across her mind.

"I can't sleep," she muttered. Krone was becoming lonelier by the day. Thinking back to her time in Heim, she was tempted to praise her past self for enduring all the time she'd spent apart from Ein. "Well, that can't be helped. I love him even more now, so it's only natural."

She quickly organized her thoughts and got out of bed. She grabbed her coat and left the room, hoping to clear her mind in the courtyard. But before she knew it, Krone was standing at Ein's door a few minutes later. Since only the royal family and a select few were allowed on this floor of the castle, there were no guards posted outside the rooms. When she put her hand on the doorknob, Krone discovered that Ein's room was unlocked, and the door opened with ease.

"I'm entering without permission," Krone remarked. "What an evil woman I've become."

She scolded herself, but that didn't stop her from pressing on. In fact, Ein's scent filled the room and beckoned her inside. Once she stepped in, Krone immediately stopped herself.

"Ein," Krone said with pangs of loneliness in her voice.

The owner of the room was out, and she certainly shouldn't be sneaking in. After much agony, she took her second step inside. Could Ein be at his desk or on the sofa? She knew that he wouldn't be there, yet she couldn't stop hoping that he might be.

"Of course he isn't."

She fully expected that he wouldn't be around, but she was clinging to a sliver of hope that he was. Yes, she could speak to him through the message bird, but that couldn't fill the void Krone felt inside.

No, I must leave. The girl was still fighting with her emotions. She knew she shouldn't be there, but her legs just wouldn't listen. From there, she slowly took another step and then another before arriving at the foot of Ein's bed.

"I'm sorry," Krone said, apologizing to the empty room around her as she took a seat on his bed.

Her weight pressing down on the bed caused it to creak ever so slightly before she took the message bird out of her pocket. Krone felt guilty for breaking into his room, but the mountain of things she wanted to say to Ein suddenly popped into her head. Perhaps it was because she was in *his* room, but she felt oddly calm and comfortable.

“But I should apologize later,” she said.

But to do so, she needed him back by his side in the near future. Finally, Krone managed to vocalize her feelings.

“I want to see you soon. It seems like I get lonely much more easily than I thought.”

She let out a giggle while speaking in her usual teasing tone. Krone didn’t want to trouble Ein, so she made an effort not to use her magical energy while speaking.

“H-Huh?!” she gasped.

Yet, the message bird gave a pale-blue glow and blinked a few times—a signal that the message was sent. Did she unintentionally use her magic, or did the device activate all by itself? Either way, her words were on their way to Ein. That was the most important bit.

“It’s all your fault. It’s all because you aren’t back yet,” Krone said as she lay on Ein’s bed.

Unable to take her message back, she had decided to push the blame onto the boy. She bent her knees, hugged his pillow, and closed her eyes. In a moment of frustration, she noticed that she was no longer unable to sleep. In fact, she was overcome with a wave of drowsiness and a sense of security.

“I haven’t said a single lie, but...” Krone trailed off.

What reply would she receive? She didn’t expect to receive one, but she wasn’t sure if she’d be able to recover if her heartfelt words were ignored.

However, the anxious Krone slowly calmed herself, taking a deep breath as she felt her eyelids grow heavy. She took another breath and felt the strength leave her body. With a third deep breath, she said just how lonely she was feeling.

“Come home soon, you numbskull.”

After a fourth deep breath, her breathing stabilized as she gave herself up to her sleepiness.

Several minutes had passed since Krone fell asleep on Ein’s bed. A suspicious Martha approached the door, sensing a presence within the crown prince’s room. No one was in the living room, but the door to his bedroom was half-open.

“Is someone there?” she called gently.

Martha expected Olivia to be in there. It would make sense for the second princess to miss her son and sneak into his room. However, the

maid was instead met with the sight of Krone sleeping on Ein's bed; she was clutching his pillow.

"Oh my. I suppose Lady Krone is just as lonely," Martha murmured.

She noticed that the young girl wasn't properly wrapped in a blanket, and silently fixed it. Martha should've scolded the girl for sneaking into the crown prince's room, but that thought didn't even cross her mind. And who could blame her?

"If you catch a cold, you'll worry Sir Ein upon his return," Martha whispered, kindly smiling as she left the room.

The young lady had crossed the sea to express her love to the crown prince. Martha found this to be rather heartwarming, so she had chosen to sit back and simply watch over the pair from the shadows.

Just moments after Krone had nodded off in his room, Ein had gone to speak with the girl taking refuge in the lodge's open room. With a fresh change of clothes and the soot washed out of her face and hair, the girl was starting to look her age.

She burst into tears once she heard of what was going on at the tower.

"P-Please, nothing would make me happier than to see my little sister spared!" she sniffled.

"We still don't know for sure if she's there. It's just a possibility," Ein replied.

"Even so! If there's any sort of lead..."

Upon seeing the girl's tears of joy, Katima leaned in to ask a question. "I should have asked mew earlier, but what is your sister's name? We won't be able to search for her without it, mew see."

"M-My deepest apologies!" the girl stammered. "I-I'm Bara and my sister's name is May. She's only six years old, so she's still really little."

"Hm, I see, I see. Mrow..."

"M-May I also ask about you all? I'm sure you're all aristocrats, but..."

They hadn't even introduced themselves to each other yet.

"I'm Ein and the cat over there is Katima."

"Mrow! I'm not a cat! I'm a Cait-Sith!"

"Um, so you're all aristocrats, correct?" Bara asked again.

Not a lot of news was likely to make it down to the slums, as evidenced by Bara's seemingly blank stare upon hearing the names of her saviors.

"We're not just any aristocrats, but it's a little difficult to explain,"

Ein said before he started for the lounge. "Aunt Katima, I'll have Dill watch over the two of you. If you need anything, give him a shout."

"Roger that!" Katima replied.

Bara was clearly confused by the boy's parting words. What did he mean by saying they weren't just *any* aristocrats?

"Please tell me," Bara pleaded. "Who are you all?"

"Hm, I suppaws there really isn't a reason to hide it," Katima started.

"Please! You all saved my life! I'd love to know the identities of my saviors!"

"That boy's full name is Ein von Ishtarica, and mine is Katima von Ishtarica. I don't think I need to say anything more, right?"

"Ishtarica?! You mean..."

"Mya ha ha! I get such a kick out of the look of shock on your face!"

With the crown prince and his marshal out, Katima had set herself up on the lounge's sofa. "Well, it's time for me-ow to get to work as well."

"What do you mean, Lady Katima?" Dill asked.

"It'll do me-ow no good to laze about the lodge and do nothing. I'll take care of a few things before they get back." The first princess started scribbling on a piece of paper. "Ein is so naive. Say he rescues those kids in the tower, then what? That kitten needs to use his head a bit more often."

"Lady Katima?"

"We've gotta be purrepared to help out with the victims. We'll need to contact the local knights station and check for missing persons reports. Then if there are any injuries, we need medical personnel ready to go. Ah, and we should have fresh clothes on hand too, I doubt those poor kids will be in anything but rags. And..."

"Lady Katima!"

"Mrow?! Dill, what's wrong?!"

"I-If there's anything I can do, I shall offer my assistance. Please don't try to handle all of this by yourself."

Dill might have been feeling a bit lonely. He had been tasked with guarding the first princess and had spent most of his time in Ist at the lodge. As Ein's bodyguard, he must've felt a touch vexed. Realizing this, Katima looked up with a smile.

"As a member of House Gracier, I'll need mew to draft a letter or two. Could you handle that for me? I *am* suppawsed to be traveling incognito, after all."

"Of course! I can do so right away!" Dill eagerly replied.

"Mya ha ha! We have our own handful of fighting to contend

with!"

With a hearty laugh, the princess prayed for Ein and Chris's plan to be a success.

In front of a lodge, a single carriage was slowly creaking forward in its place as a pair of robed individuals hopped on board.

"I'll ask one last time. Are the two of you sure about this?" Graff asked, sitting before the robed pair.

The pair removed their hoods.

"We've already made our decision, so we'll be fine," Ein said before turning to his guard. "Right, Chris?"

The marshal sighed. "Quite honestly, I wouldn't mind if we headed back to the lodge right now."

Chris had reluctantly tagged along only because she was guarding the prince. Silverd had given the boy express permission to look into the red foxes, and if that burly wyvern was involved, so was Ein. The prince had narrowly convinced his marshal to sneak into the Tower of Wisdom with him.

"It's nowhere near as dangerous as the Sea Dragon, right?" Ein asked. "I'm sure we'll be fine, then."

"Well, that's a given, of course. There's no way that wyvern could possibly be as terrifying," Chris replied.

"Then again, it wouldn't matter where I went if we lost with you by my side. I'd always be in danger, even at the lodge."

"That's totally wrong! Staying put is a hundred—no, thousands of times better than sticking your nose into the affairs of others!"

"I know, I know. I'm just trying to act a little tough. Forgive me."

If the red foxes were truly involved in this series of kidnappings, time was of the essence. No one was expecting the foxes to be connected, but even a small chance of their involvement couldn't be ignored. On the same wavelength as her prince, Chris wasn't able to find it in her to completely disregard his wishes.

Graff laughed. "It's great to see you both look so cheery, but please be careful." He then glanced at a large wooden box that was sitting alongside them in the carriage. "Here's what I've prepared. There's a secret compartment in this box, which I'd like the two of you to hide inside. I'll then place some magic stones on top and you'll go straight into the tower from there."

"I understand," Ein replied. "We'll be sent directly to the underground facility, correct?"

"Precisely."

"Thank you very much. From here on out, the two of us will give it our all."

This was their best bet. With the trading firm's help, the pair would sneak into the tower's basement under the guise of a magic stone shipment. Next, Ein would use his skills to overheat the furnace. Then once he could confirm that the tower's security was down, the prince would make his way to the research facility's upper floors.

"Many aristocrats have offices in the tower, so how will you find the viscount's office?" Graff asked.

"I just have to brute force my way through that. I'll check each and every room, I think," Ein replied.

Graff laughed. "That's quite the conundrum."

"Since we'll be stopping their source of power, we won't be able to use the elevators. I think it'll be exhausting to run up to the twentieth floor."

"Please be careful," Graff said with a smile. "If you get injured, I'm sure Krone will be devastated."

Ein gave a dry laugh—he couldn't deny that.

After the trio engaged in some further small talk, Graff peeked out of one of the carriage's windows.

"I suppose it's time," he said. "Now then, hurry and get in the box."

"All right," Ein said before he turned to his guard. "Chris, let's go."

"Understood," the marshal replied.

The wooden crate the pair lay at the bottom of was about the size of two bathtubs.

"I shall place the first lid on top of you," Graff said, before laying a wooden plank over them.

Rumbles and rattles followed soon after as a large load of magic stones was dumped on top of the plank.

"I'm sure this is quite uncomfortable for you both," Graff apologetically said.

"We're fine!" Ein called out. "We'll endure this no problem!"

"I'm glad to hear that. Now then, we'll be heading into the tower's premises. Please keep quiet."

Minutes later, Ein could hear the carriage doors opening up.

"Agustos Trading Firm."

A crowd of footsteps approached the crate and carried it inside, causing the box's contents to shift around.

"A success," Ein whispered.

"Yes, it seems like we're in the clear," Chris whispered back.

"But it's a little cramped in here..."

"Eep! S-Sir Ein!"

The boy felt something warm and soft in his hands. He couldn't tell within the darkness, but Chris's embarrassed cry gave it away.

“S-Sorry!” Ein apologized.

“I’m fine, but it’s a little embarrassing. Please don’t move around too much.”

Ein could even hear Chris taking shallow breaths. They were so close to each other that their thighs would occasionally touch. Her sweet scent made the boy’s mind grow fuzzy and increasingly nervous. *What am I thinking?! This is the middle of an important investigation!*

He took deep breaths to calm himself down. A large thud could be heard from outside, implying that the pair’s vessel had been set down. The sound of creaking gears and mechanical noises echoed through the air as the box started to move once again. A few minutes later, the pair were no longer able to feel any sort of nearby presence before looking at each other within the darkness.

“You think we can come out now?” Ein asked.

“Let’s wait a few moments more, just to be sure. If we *do* get caught, I’m afraid I must knock them out,” Chris replied.

“Got it.”

The two focused their senses, trying to gauge their surroundings from within the crate. No voices or presences could be found.

“Seems like we’re safe,” Chris noted.

“Let’s go,” Ein said. “We’re not working with a time limit, but I’d rather finish it tonight while there aren’t as many people around.”

“S-So we *do* have a time limit?”

“Don’t sweat the small stuff! Come on!”

The crate didn’t have any hidden doors or extra flaps, so there was only one way out—bust it wide open.

“This skill also comes in handy for situations like this,” Ein remarked, using his Phantom Hands to rip open the box.

Once they were able to squeeze out of the box, the prince placed his sword at his waist. Now able to look around, he was greeted by a wholly new sight.

“This is amazing...” he murmured.

“So this is how it looks on the inside,” Chris observed.

Magick City Ist definitely had its fantastical vistas, but the tower’s basement appeared to be more mechanical than anything else. Metal scaffolding lined the walls alongside countless iron pipes. His sizable underground surroundings led Ein to believe that a small town could be built within the tower’s walls. In the center was a round pool filled with a translucent liquid that glowed turquoise. The light that it emanated dimly illuminated the entire area. The prince was flabbergasted by the large mixer that rotated in the pool’s center.

“And...” he murmured, searching for the large turbine.

He found a large contraption above the mixer and guessed that that was what he needed to overheat. A series of pipes protruded from

the turbine before congregating into a single large pillar that stretched towards the ceiling.

“Katima said that this furnace was ancient, but it’s still impressive,” Ein said.

Chris seemed equally stunned. “Indeed... This is like an iron fortress.”

The pipes above the pool had a regal nature to them, as if they were a throne. The central pillar and its appendages seemed to reach for the heavens. The sight was reminiscent of a massive root, absorbing substance from the pool of liquefied stones below before sending it throughout the rest of the tower.

“Like a root...” Ein muttered. “That makes it a little more familiar to me. Now then...”

The boy hid behind a few other crates while gauging his surroundings. As expected, a few guards were making their rounds.

“I think I’ll knock them out before they have the chance to notice us,” Chris said. “It’s a bit forceful, but I don’t think we have any other choice.”

“You’re right. So I guess we *are* forcing our way through,” Ein replied.

“Please wait here, Sir Ein. I’ll return in a few moments.”

“I’ll remain hidden while approaching the pool. I don’t want to waste time.”

“Will you be all right?”

“Even if I do get caught, I think I can handle a few guards. And besides, you’ll come to my aid, won’t you?”

After receiving the prince’s utmost trust, the elf sighed before she smiled. “Trust me. I’ll be back in a flash, so please don’t push yourself.”

In a blink of an eye, Chris had disappeared from his line of sight.

“Guess I’ll also get a move on,” the prince said.

He made his way to the pool of liquefied magic stones. The crates he’d been smuggled in with were placed several floors above the pool, so Ein needed to head down a few flights of stairs. As he set foot on the grated metal footholds, he heard a weak clang—he wasn’t sure whether they could support his weight.

“I-I’ll go over there,” he said.

He proceeded to another flight of stairs and made his way down while clutching the iron railing. The grated metal flooring continued down the stairs. As Ein gazed at the pool, he noticed an aurora-like phenomenon occurring on the liquid’s surface. Like the tower’s aurora from the other day, the lights would occasionally turn blue and give off a fluorescent flicker as it was being stirred around.

When the pool occasionally turned dark, he could sense an

especially strong presence of magical energy. As the whirring sounds of the machines filled the room, Ein noticed the darkness of the iron pipes being illuminated by the glow of liquefied stones. The lights gave off an otherworldly aura, but the prince was soon stopped in his tracks when he noticed a pair of guards chatting.

“Anything unusual?”

“Nothing at all. Continue to remain vigilant.”

The guards were wearing green uniforms and caps, indicating they worked for the tower. They stood in front of Ein and marched ahead, their backs turned towards the prince. If Ein were to proceed, he would inevitably get caught by them.

“Well, if push comes to shove...” Ein whispered. He had to get to the bottom of this kidnapping case and take a look into the viscount’s dealings. “No hard feelings, but you guys just happened to pull the short straw. I really do feel bad about this.”

While Ein wasn’t as sprightly as the marshal, his absorbed power granted him a swiftness that could make short work of the guards. Upon hearing a clang of metal, the guards turned around to be greeted by an enormous black tendril that knocked out one of them almost instantly.

“Who—” the other guard started.

“Sorry, but I’m gonna need you to take a nap as well,” Ein said, knocking out the second guard before they could call for help.

He confirmed that the guards were still breathing before he let out a sigh of relief. Upon looking up, Ein’s eyes locked with Chris’s. She’d just defeated the guards on the upper level and appeared to be baffled by Ein’s actions. She placed her index finger to her lips as though to say, “Shhh!”

“I know, I know,” Ein whispered.

The marshal read his lips before she disappeared from his sight once more.

“Whew, just a bit more,” Ein said, as he dashed down three flights of stairs.

He eventually got to the bottom and set foot on a floor that seemed to be constructed of polished obsidian—completely different from the floors above. It was a straight shot to the pool, however the sets of stairs surrounding the pool had left Ein concerned. There were about five sets of stairs alongside the delivery ramp used for the stones.

“But I don’t have time to complain,” he muttered.

As he ran ahead, he looked up to see the floors above him littered with the bodies of knocked-out guards. One by one, the guards kept dropping.

“Seems like Chris has wrapped things up.”

He locked eyes with Chris again before dashing up the stairs to meet her.

"Thank you for your patience. It seems we timed this quite well," Chris said.

"I only defeated two guards, but no problems here," Ein replied.

"I panicked a little when I saw it... I'm glad there were only two."

After confirming all was well, the pair gazed at the pool in front of them. It was within a large metallic bowl that Ein had never seen before.

"Sir Ein, are you sure that you can do this?" Chris asked.

"Yep. I tested it this morning in the lodge's bathtub. I had a good grasp of it," Ein replied.

He clenched the railing surrounding the pool and prepared to unleash his latest skill—Ocean Current. While still at the castle, Ein had confirmed that he'd obtained the skill from his tussle with the Sea Dragon. As the name implied, it granted its user power over the flow of water.

"All right!" he said.

He placed his hand over the pool and activated Ocean Current. Waves suddenly formed in the pool of liquid stones before evolving into a whirlpool that contained the turbine at its center.

"This is...quite a terrifying skill to witness," Chris said.

"I think the strength of this skill relies on my magical energy," Ein replied. "I can make it just a little stronger."

Focusing even harder on the pool, the prince exerted a bit more of his strength as the whirlpool continued to grow. The liquefied stones started to give off a glow so brilliant that the pair were almost blinded by it.

The underground pipes started to vibrate as ominous groans reverberated through the air. Then, after a dull creak, the mixer stopped—the safety mechanism had activated, just as Katima said it would.

Ein laughed. Beads of sweat started to form on his brow, but they weren't just from the exertion—the pool was scalding hot.

"I'm the crown prince, but I can't help but chuckle at this situation," Ein noted.

"Goodness... You're smiling, you know," Chris pointed out.

"Sorry. This might be a bit improper for me to say out loud, but this is a lot of fun." He had sneaked into an unfamiliar underground facility and was blinded by the peak of technological advancement. The boy felt a bit like a spy, maybe a bit like a villain too. He'd sneaked in to investigate a crime, but having done so still didn't make him feel like his actions were very just.

"Sir Ein..." Chris said.

“Yeah, I think it’s about time.”

The turbine started to tremble and waver. The pipes surrounding it were hot to the touch, causing sweat to run down the pair’s necks.

“Come on! You’re at your limit, aren’t you?” Ein said.

The room quivered and shook. Loud rumbles sounded as the security alarms blinked red. A gust of hot wind was expelled from the pool before a cold breeze of white immediately fell from the ceiling. The surface of the pool started to freeze.

The stirred stones had taken on a sorbet-like consistency, proof that the turbine had been overheated.

“Sir Ein! Let’s head up! Hurry!” Chris said.

The security alarms had stopped blinking, but an emergency alarm had activated in their place. Ein nodded and dashed ahead.

“First, we need to get to the basement’s upper levels!” Ein called.

“Indeed!” Chris replied. “According to Lady Katima, we have to finish this up while they’re transferring over the emergency energy!”

“I know! If they get things going again, there’s no point in disabling the security!”

The duo rushed up the metallic footholds in hopes they’d get up to the underground area’s upper floors. Their legs were getting sore, but now wasn’t the time to catch a breath. They got back to where they’d busted out of the crate and quickly found the emergency staircase. With that, Ein and Chris had finally set foot on the Tower of Wisdom’s ground level.

“Stairs! So many stairs!” Ein gasped.

Chris laughed. “There’s nothing we can do about that.”

The two had already climbed about forty to fifty flights worth of stairs today. Ein had become painfully aware of the importance of a good elevator, and he was tempted to throw in the towel.

“But we’re finally on the right floor!” Chris said.

As they rushed up the emergency stairs with the grated metal steps, the pair finally saw the inscription “20F.”

“We have to find Viscount Sage’s office now!” Ein said, swinging open the door with gusto.

Once he emerged from the stairs, there was a circular passageway with high ceilings that surrounded the tower’s inner workings. A series of large doors stood at equidistant intervals—doors twice the size of the classroom doors found in the Royal Kingsland Academy.

“Awesome... This really is a research facility,” Ein gasped.

“Well, that’s what these rooms are,” Chris replied.

The walls, floors, and ceilings were spotlessly white, but the pair’s surroundings took on an ominous atmosphere thanks to the pale-blue

emergency lights lining the ground. Researchers dressed in white lab coats were frantically running around, clearly due to the furnace overheating.

Clad in their robes, the prince and his marshal were running through the hallways when they noticed that the doors around them had nameplates attached.

“Chris, we just need to look at each one!” Ein called.

“Indeed! Let’s hurry!”

Amid the panic, not a single researcher noticed the two robed figures scurrying around.

“Hey, what’s going on?” someone called.

“Go to the lower levels immediately. We must evacuate while we still have the emergency energy to spare,” another replied.

“But even the security’s down!”

“It’s not just you, it’s down for everyone in this building!”

Ein felt a pang of guilt upon witnessing the results of his actions.

“Sir Ein, let’s head up! It’s not on this floor!” Chris called. She was pointing to a staircase she had found while running around.

While the pair hurried up the stairs, many of the tower’s researchers were still making their way out. Ein and Chris sneaked around as they weaved between fleeing employees. A few researchers seemed to be suspicious of the duo, but they were unable to move against the flow of people rushing out. No one could call out to stop the robed duo. They made it to the twenty-first floor, but Ein and Chris couldn’t find Sage’s office. They kept climbing up floor after floor—desperately searching for the office.

“Finally! We found it!” Ein huffed.

They’d reached the tower’s twenty-eighth floor. Unlike the previous floors, there weren’t many offices on this floor, and each room was quite large.

“There’s no doubt that this is the fruit of the previous head’s influence,” Chris observed. “It’s impressively large.”

There was around a twenty-meter gap between the central pillar’s door and the next office. The viscount’s office must’ve been around forty meters wide.

“Let’s go in,” Chris said. Upon clenching the handle, she noticed that the door was locked. “Hm, it really does seem like the viscount has a few secrets that he’d like to keep hidden.”

“Is that an iron padlock?” Ein asked. “It seems heavily guarded.”

“No, this is made from mithril, as is my rapier. It’s no ordinary lock, but a magical tool. It’s a bit cheaper than the one that guards our castle’s treasury, but it’s in a similar vein.”

“Wow. *That’s* not suspicious at all,” the prince sarcastically replied.

Now, how could they open this? Should they try to forcibly enter? As Ein tried to think of a method, Chris immediately unsheathed her rapier. A shocked Ein was frozen in place, but the marshal had swung her blade so fast that it was imperceptible to the prince's eye. The mithril lock was cleanly sliced in two before it fell to the ground with a clunk. The rapier was made of the same material, yet she had destroyed the lock with ease—Ein found that he could only praise his marshal's way around a blade.

"Yes! It opened, Sir Ein!" Chris cheered.

"Well, you *did* destroy the lock... I appreciate your help though," Ein replied. He pushed the door but it didn't budge a bit, requiring him to whip out his Phantom Hands. "And we're in, Chris."

The door likely opened automatically, making it quite convenient despite its large size. Like earlier, it reminded the prince of the door to his classroom.

"Hm?" Chris replied. "But you'd basically do the same thing!"

"All right, all right. It's open now, isn't it? Let's go in."

As soon as they stepped inside the office, a larger clatter went off and the door swung shut. Now trapped inside, Ein tried to pry open the door with his Phantom Hands, but the mechanism behind wouldn't allow the door to budge. Matters were made even worse when alarms started blaring.

"We're trapped. What'll we do?" Ein asked.

He considered just breaking the entire room.

"You seem quite carefree. I think we'll be fine. Could you please stand back from the door?" Chris replied.

"S-Sure. Okay."

Chris positioned her rapier in front of her as she gave a single thrust of her weapon.

"What are you doing?" Ein asked.

"I was just thinking of creating a hole enough for a person to escape through."

Chris once again disappeared from sight and rhythmically thrust her weapon against the door. A few seconds later, she used her wind magic to create a circular hole in the door's center.

"Heh heh. What do you think?" she adorably asked, beaming proudly.

"I'm absolutely stunned. I think I underestimated you..."

Even with a single rapier, Chris's abilities far exceeded that of a human's. *Well, she is an elf*, Ein thought, but didn't dare to vocalize it.

The prince glanced around at Viscount Sage's office. The floor was made of black marble with traces of an enormous magical tool dented into it. The tool must've been sold off or stored elsewhere. However, not all of the viscount's tools had been moved.

“There’s a lot of odd-looking tools remaining,” Ein observed.

The prince’s eye had been caught by a series of large, cylindrical glass containers. Inside each container was a monster stored within fluorescent fluid.

“Indeed,” Chris replied. “Even if he’s not involved in the abductions, it seems that we have a few questions to ask of him.”

“There’s even a bison, but this one’s much bulkier than the one we saw in town. It looks like a balloon.”

“He must be forcibly enhancing these beasts. Though they’re monsters, I pity to see them look like this...”

Every now and then, bubbles would be expelled from the mouths of these monsters—proof that they were still alive. *Though it’s smaller than the burly one, there’s even a wyvern in here.* While looking around, Ein discovered another door that led deeper into the office. It was hard to spot, as the door had been placed between a pair of glass cylinders.

“Chris, over there,” Ein said.

The pair slid between the cylinders and found themselves standing before another locked door.

“I’ll break this too,” Chris said, expertly destroying the lock.

This was a luxurious door built out of wood, the kind of door one would find in an aristocrat’s home instead of a lab. The pair could feel a human presence coming from the other side of the door.

“Um, Sir Ein, you might see something horrific beyond this door...” Chris started.

“I’m fine. I’ll be right behind you,” Ein insisted.

“But...”

“I’m the crown prince. Should an aristocrat commit a crime, I mustn’t look away from that.”

He gazed at Chris with his mother’s jasper eyes, causing the marshal to falter. As she gave a silent nod, he put his hand on the doorknob and opened the door.

The sight before him wasn’t horrific at all.

“Wow, this is a cesspool of greed and debauchery,” Ein observed.

The room was lavishly decorated, as if it were a suite in an expensive hotel. Among the plethora of luxuries before his eyes, Ein noticed an enormous bathtub in the back of the room as well as a large bed. The boy cautiously searched the room before finding a desk that had a quill pen and a stack of documents lying atop it.

However, there were little girls behind bars on the opposite wall.

“Chris, I’ll leave them to you,” Ein said. “As a man, I feel that I shouldn’t approach them any further.”

“Certainly,” Chris replied.

The girls were clad in light rags that barely covered their bodies.

The poor things trembled and shuddered in place as the door opened, but they were visibly relieved when Chris removed her hood and revealed herself to be a woman. Many of the girls let out tears of joy. Upon closer inspection, most of them appeared to be between six to fifteen years of age.

“You’ll be fine,” Chris assured them. “We came to save you.”

As Ein heard the gentle cheers behind him, he approached the stack of documents on Sage’s desk.

“You’re the lowest of the low, Sage,” Ein muttered.

The first document detailed revenue and expenditures, with sale prices for both boys and girls listed. However, after a certain point, only the going rates for boys were listed.

“In other words, some of the girls haven’t been sold yet.” This was the reason there were girls behind bars in a secret room. “I thought he was a material witness to the kidnappings, but I was wrong.”

Sage was the mastermind behind the kidnappings, and it seemed that a handful of stern interrogation sessions would be needed to track down the sold children.

“And it seems like he’s committed a few other crimes...” the prince said.

While waiting for Chris to return, he glanced at the thick stack of documents and quickly grabbed them.

“Sir Ein, we’ll lead them all out,” Chris said. “I believe there’s no need for us to hide; we haven’t committed any crimes, anyway.”

“I know. We should proudly walk right out the front door,” Ein replied.

The elf glanced at the stack in his hands. “Anything of note in those documents?”

“More than enough to incriminate him and sentence him to death.”

“Glad to hear it. Once we’ve left the tower, please issue an edict immediately.”

“Will the knights be able to storm the tower if I do?”

“Absolutely. We won’t be able to seize the entire tower if we need to, but we can do something awfully close to it.”

Ein turned to leave when he noticed the girls dressed in white lab coats.

“I didn’t think it was right for them to walk out in rags, so I covered them up with some of the lab coats I found nearby,” Chris said.

“Sounds good. Then let’s leave before Sage returns...”

Ein had stepped forward when the roaring of several monsters howled in from the next room over. It appeared to be coming from the glass cylinders.

“Raaar!”

“Graaah!”

The pained yet aggressive roars frightened the girls, causing them to shrink and tremble in place. In response, the prince and his marshal put their guards up.

“I’m guessing this is one of the room’s defense mechanisms,” Ein said. “Wouldn’t you agree?”

“Why are you always so carefree about these things?” Chris asked. “But yes, I agree.”

“Then we should clean up in front.”

“Um, I sense that you’re ready for a fight, but you mustn’t.”

Chris was the prince’s guard, after all. Despite that, Ein refused to falter and walked ahead.

“On the off chance you went down, I’d be in deep trouble myself,” Ein said. “We should fight together from the start. I don’t think you’d lose, of course. We’ve come this far, haven’t we? Let’s finish it off.”

“U-Ugh... That makes it hard for me to refuse.”

“Come on, let’s go! Let’s just beat them and run!”

Ein rushed ahead as he kicked the door open. Exhilaration gripped his body, and that feeling only grew when he unsheathed his sword. Overflowing with power from within, the boy’s Phantom Hands appeared to be summoned with more bulk than ever before. Right on his tail, Chris noticed that an aura of dark magic alongside flashes of purple lightning had enveloped one of his hands.

“Sir Ein! Where did that blade come from?!” Chris cried.

“I don’t know!” Ein yelled back. “I just used my power and it sorta kinda just appeared!”

“Huh?! Don’t use such a terrifying power!”

Before Ein could respond, a Red Bison was charging right at him. Unlike the academy’s training hologram of the beast, the hefty bison had its twisted horns aimed straight at its prey. A woman’s voice suddenly echoed in his mind.

“You’ll be fine.”

He’d heard this voice before. It was the one from right before he awoke from his coma—the voice of the Elder Lich. Ein smiled, not even questioning whether he could trust the voice.

“I was told that I’d be fine!” he roared.

With a single slash of his blade, the Red Bison was cleanly cut in two—a flawless slice. Though stunned for a moment, Chris started to rethink her priorities.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, but please don’t push yourself!” she yelled.

However, the duo were in too deep to stop now. The marshal unsheathed her rapier and expertly wielded her blade against the

attacking monsters. One by one, the beasts fell to the floor. However, Chris was concerned.

"This isn't normal," she said. "They've completely lost their sense of selves. It's as though they're possessed by something!"

"All the more reason to defeat them and head outside then!" Ein called.

"Indeed... Then I'll mobilize the knights immediately!"

Even while they were fighting, the glass cylinders shattered to reveal more monsters. A sickly sweet aroma emanated from the spilled liquid, a scent the pair found offensive to their noses.

"Grrr! Grar!"

"Sir Ein!" Chris called.

"I know!" Using his Phantom Hands, the prince caught a giant snake that was attempting a sneak attack. His burly hands whirled the creature around before he sliced it in two.

"Gawr!"

Another monster popped out in front of him.

"Reeeee!"

And another from above—a wyvern. Ein hesitated for a moment, unsure of which beast to prioritize. In the next moment, Chris jumped in to lend him a hand.

"It seems you're still not used to fighting multiple monsters at once," she said.

"This'll be a great learning experience for me."

The pair smiled as they found themselves standing back-to-back.

"But I've grown stronger, haven't I?" Ein asked.

Chris laughed. "Indeed, you really have."

"Thank you. That gives me the motivation to keep going."

The pair stood in the middle of the room with a horde of monsters surrounding them. As both parties inched closer, Ein and Chris were the first to make a move.

"Chris, do you think grandfather will reward me for uncovering Sage's misdeeds?"

"We *did* sneak into the Tower of Wisdom, so I believe that will cancel it out."

Ein gave a forced laugh.

"But I ultimately gave you permission," Chris continued. "If you're to be scolded, I shall be scolded right along with you!"

"But I pushed you into coming along! I feel like you shouldn't get in trouble. Rah!"

A monster growled in pain.

"That's not how it works!" Chris replied. "I'm your guard, after all!"

Another went down with a screech.

The glow of the alarm's red light bounced off their weapons, filling the room. The number of monsters decreased until only a sole Green Wyvern remained. Ein used his Phantom Hands to stop the monster in its tracks.

"Chris!" he called out, looking up to the ceiling.

"I'm here!" Chris replied, gracefully leaping across the slick floor with her rapier aimed right between the wyvern's eyes. "And it's over!"

With a thrust, the rapier pierced through the wyvern's skull. Unable to utter a cry, the monster slowly closed its eyes and fell to the ground. Ein and Chris looked at each other as they sheathed their blades.

"Good work."

"I'd like to say the same to you, Sir Ein."

They high-fived, praising each other for their prowess in battle.



Once led out into the halls of the research facility, the girls discovered that all was quiet, without a soul in sight. By the time the emergency lights were turned on, most of the researchers had already evacuated. While they were still within the confines of the building, it had been such a long time since these girls had even the slightest taste of freedom such as this.

Many stood in awe as tears fell down their cheeks, but one friendly girl in particular had called out to Ein.

“Hey, do you think I can find my older sister?”

The young girl bore a resemblance to Bara and sported the same colored hair. In fact, she was Bara’s little sister, May.

“You’ll be able to see her real soon,” Ein assured. “Wait just a little longer, okay? We have to get out of here first.”

“Okay! Thank you, mister!”

May was still very much an innocent little girl, so Chris could only smile instead of scolding the child for speaking so casually with the crown prince. With Ein and Chris leading the way out, the girls followed close behind them. Suddenly, the group was briefly blinded by the white light that lined the halls—a sign that the furnace had been safely restarted.

“Do you think the elevators are working now?” Ein asked.

“I believe so,” Chris replied. “However, if we take the elevator...we won’t have many avenues of escape. We’d be essentially trapped, so I’d find that to be unwise.”

“I’m tired, but I guess we should take the stairs.”

“Indeed. The normal, nonemergency staircases should be quite wide as well.”

Given that the pair were leading out dozens of girls, even the tower’s spacious hallways quickly became a rowdy affair. The clacking of the duo’s shoes were followed by the soft, unsteady thumps of the girls’ slippers.

They made their way down the stairs, but the marshal suddenly stopped.

“I knew they’d come,” Chris said before she fell silent.

After receiving a nod from Ein, she proceeded down the stairs as he looked on. The prince remained with the girls as he tried to protect them. Eventually, he could hear frantic footsteps tapping about from below.

“As you said, we would’ve been surrounded if we’d used the elevator,” Ein noted.

It wouldn’t have been a problem if they were by themselves, but

the pair were running with a group they had to protect.

“Hah... Hah... Hurry!” Viscount Sage shouted in a panic.

“Yessir!”

The desperation in his rising voice was evident. His footsteps grew louder as the once quiet, barren room instantly transformed into a cacophony. The frenzy only grew as the worried viscount barked out orders to his men. His blood was boiling.

“Hurry! The magical tool guarding my office has been destroyed! Someone has broken in!” the viscount roared.

Despite his clearly out-of-shape physique, the sweat-covered viscount climbed the stairs faster than anyone else. Without taking a moment to catch his breath, he pushed on upon reaching a platform. However, the brash man froze and proceeded to shudder—he could feel a steely gaze bearing down upon him. He gingerly glanced towards the stairs and locked eyes with a stunning blonde beauty who was staring at him with a murderous intent like no other.

“You’re the one from the other day...” Sage started.

“I shall ask, just to be sure,” Chris said. “You’re Viscount Sage, correct?”

“Move! I have business to attend to in my research office!”

“I’ve found some very...*interesting* documents deep within your office. You are the viscount, are you not?”

Despite using a polite tone to treat him like any other aristocrat, the marshal’s frosty words could leave anyone on the receiving end with a bit of frostbite. Sage let out a courageous laugh, but he had visibly broken out into a cold sweat.

He pompously yet sneakily raised hand in the air to grab the attention of his knight.

“I have no idea what you’re on about, but you’ve entered my office without my permission, no?” he said. “That’s a terrible, terrible crime. It’s outrageous to think you’d be allowed to break into the residence of an aristocrat.”

“Not at all. You’ve committed grave crimes, breaking many Ishtarican laws. Your claims will be null and void,” Chris retorted.

“Me? Commit a crime? Are you done with your jokes?”

“Imprisonment alone is a grave offense. Why don’t we stop with the senseless exchange?”

Sage raised both hands in the air and gave a hearty laugh. “Ha ha ha! You saw the girls that I’ve been sheltering and mistook it for imprisonment? Why, I was planning on bringing them to the station tomorrow! Perhaps *you* lot are the ones responsible for those serial kidnappings of late! Since you’ve been sneaking around, you probably have a few secrets yourselves, no?”

Even if Sage denied the claims, they still had more than enough

evidence to imprison him. Still, Ein couldn't stand the insufferable man making excuses.

"May I ask a question?" the crown prince chimed in. "Should the girls claim that you've treated them violently, will you admit to having committed a crime?"

"These girls are all confused!" Sage insisted. "How could their claims be used as any sort of evidence?"

Wanting to bring this to an end, Sage lowered his hands—a signal for his knight to rush the prince and his guard. However, this knight was up against Ishtarica's marshal, Christina Wernstein. The only person in the land who could best her was the former marshal and King Silverd's personal guard, Lloyd Gracier.

"Huh?" the lead knight uttered, their blade falling down the stairs after being cut clean off the hilt.

"You have dared to point your blade at someone you are absolutely forbidden to," Chris said. "Truthfully, I should lop off your head, but I still have questions that need answering."

And as such, no mercy would be shown.

"H-Hey! What did she..." Sage stammered.

"I don't know! I blinked, and then my blade was..." the knight replied.

"I won't warn you twice. I suggest you toss aside your weapon and surrender," the marshal said.

The viscount's knights shuddered at the marshal's glacial tone, surrendering their weapons without looking to their master for approval. The skill gap was clear; these knights knew they wouldn't stand a chance. The prince and the girls had expected the viscount to be stunned by his loss in might. However...

"I understand. Now then, why don't we talk this out like aristocrats?" Sage haughtily suggested, raising both of his hands in surrender. "But now's just not the time yet."

He gave a wicked smirk and tapped the tip of his well-polished shoe on the ground. Purple smoke suddenly filled the air as his knights groaned while choking on the fumes. Sage must've been clad in resistant gear, as he stood around without a care in the world.

"V-Viscount..." the knights croaked.

"I've no need for knights who have shown their disloyalty," Sage said. "Now then, I remember your faces very well. You'll regret this!"

"You won't have a second chance!" Chris yelled.

"Oh, but I will! I'm glad I covered my bases so well!"

The wall behind the viscount suddenly crumbled, with a pair of beefy legs that bared sharp talons emerging from the rumble. The aggressive beast had crimson scales, standing out from other creatures. Ein and Chris recognized this monster.

“It’s the wyvern from the arena!” Ein exclaimed.

After flashing a condescending grin, the viscount leaped out of the destroyed wall and latched on to the wyvern’s back as it soared off into the night. Chris tried to rush outside to pursue him, but Ein stopped her.

“No!” he cried. “The smoke he let out is probably miasma. It’d be dangerous to press forward!”

He hastily pushed past the marshal and activated Toxin Decomposition to neutralize the smoke. Then in a flash, the toxic fumes had disappeared. The fallen knights looked up at the prince with grievous expressions on their faces.

“Don’t worry. You’ll be fine,” Ein assured them, touching each knight to break down the miasma in their bodies.

He breathed a sigh of relief upon noticing that Chris and the girls were safe. “Maybe we should’ve just cut him down and captured him, but I guess this makes things clear now,” Ein said.

“My deepest apologies. It’s my fault that I let him escape,” Chris bitterly said.

“No, it’s my fault for being slow. I thought we could get more out of him.”

But next time, I won’t be so kind. Ein clenched his hand, making a determined vow.

Chapter Seven: One's True End and Fate

Needless to say, Ist had been thrown into an uproar that night. As it was already the next day, the crown prince had ordered his knights to storm the Tower of Wisdom and seize a sizable collection of important evidence. Since morning, the knights had been dispatched to investigate anyone involved, but the viscount had vanished from the streets of Ist. He'd disappeared without a trace, immediately marking himself as a criminal.

With noon passing by, Ein received word that Oz's report was ready to review. The prince proceeded to leave the knight's station and head to the professor's lab with Chris in tow.

"I'll talk with the guards, so stay here, all right?" Chris warned.

"I know. I'll stay put, so please don't look at me so suspiciously," Ein replied.

Chris secretly smiled and walked off. Ein remembered the message bird he had in his pocket and took it out. He'd been busy the night before and had hardly had any time to check the tool. He noticed that he'd received a reply.

"I guess now's the time," he said as he clenched the tool with one hand and poured in his magical energy.

Krone's mistakenly sent message started to play.

"I want to see you soon. It seems like I get lonely much more easily than I thought..."

It was a shorter message than the others he'd received, but that handful of words left an indelible impact on him. Ein's chest started to pound as his cheeks turned pink, and he opened and closed his mouth like a fish. Completely caught off guard, Krone's face wouldn't leave his mind.

"I-I have to hurry up and reply!" he gasped.

And of course, Ein couldn't decide on what to say. Should he offer sweet words like a fairy-tale prince? Or should he talk at length about how he held the same feelings? Neither seemed to fit the bill for him. He had a few options, but in the end he chose to give a short reply, just as she had.

"Me too. I'll be back soon, so wait for me a little longer," he said.

He couldn't bring himself to say, "I want to see you soon too." He didn't have the courage to muster up those words. The message bird

blinked a few times with its usual pale-blue glow, and sent the reply to Krone. With impeccable timing, Chris returned to Ein's side.

"It seems we can go in..." the elf said before she noticed the prince's change in demeanor. "Sir Ein? Your face is red."

"Just...a lot of things happened."

"A lot of things?"

Ein played it off and entered the research facility alongside Chris.

The professor greeted the pair as soon as they stepped into his office, before proceeding to touch on the previous night's events.

"I didn't think you'd solve it all within a few days..." a smiling Oz muttered, shocked at Ein's feat.

"I think we were just lucky. It all started when we happened to get lost within the slums," Ein explained.

"Even so, you brought back wonderful results. I suppose I should expect no less from our nation's hero. Are the girls you saved on their way back to the orphanages?"

"Correct. Those from houses are being sent back home, but the rest are going to the royal capital's orphanage. I know two of the girls, so they'll be working at the castle as servants-in-training."

Ein was referring to Bara and May.

"I thought they were well educated. They were commoners at one point apparently," the prince explained.

"Hm, and then they went to the orphanage in the slums?" Oz asked.

"Their mother passed away and they ran out of money. As for their father, they have no idea where he is; he disappeared without a trace when they were very young."

"There are fewer orphans every year, but everyone still has their own challenges to face."

The atmosphere had turned heavy and glum. Despite that, Ein had one more unfortunate tidbit to provide.

"And it seems like Sage wasn't behind it all," the prince said.

"Hm? So he isn't the suspect?" the professor asked.

"No, there's no doubt that he's behind the kidnappings.

However..." Ein had received a report from the knights just this morning. "According to the knights working under him, the viscount was simply carrying out orders from above. For a while, he was only selling boys, while keeping close watch over the girls."

Oz fell silent for a moment before he asked, "Do you have any information on who could've given out these orders?"

"Unfortunately, no. It seems Sage was more vigilant about it all than we'd expected. He was even more careful when having kids delivered to his office." The prince was at a dead end—he couldn't

find anything about the true mastermind. “But I personally believe that the red foxes are behind it. The viscount’s unnaturally bulky wyvern was likely enhanced using the powers at the foxes’ disposal.”

The boy was full of questions, but this was as far as he could go—he needed to return to the royal capital. There was no reason for the crown prince to personally meddle in this incident. Well aware of this, the boy had chosen to leave the rest to the knights.

“You seem a little down, Your Highness, but you solved a serial kidnapping case all by yourself,” Oz assured him. “The citizens of Ist, myself included, are very grateful for that.”

Hoping to change topics, the professor brought out a thick envelope and handed it to Ein.

“This contains the red fox report along with everything I am aware of in writing,” Oz said.

“Th-Thank you! May I take a look?” Ein asked.

“Of course. Please feel free.”

The prince opened the envelope and undid the string that tied the bundle of papers together. He read the first title.

“A List of Locations Where the Red Foxes Have Appeared and Theories on Their Travel Routes,” Ein said as he gulped. “Right off the bat, this seems very informative.”

“I wonder. The contents of it are the important part,” Oz replied.

Despite his words, the professor had a cheery, confident smile. Ein flipped to the next page, quickly surprised to discover that the report was filled with letters and maps. The distribution map was color coded, indicating where traces of red fox activity had been seen.

“It seems like they’re dispersed throughout the continent,” Ein observed.

“Indeed. Back when I made that document, that bit took the most effort to compile. But I suppose I’m not the one who went through the trouble, but rather the adventurers that I filed a request to,” Oz said.

“Did you have the guild collect the information for you?”

“Precisely. For rare materials brought into the guild, they’re required to retain any information regarding them. I’ve taken advantage of that practice to gather information on the foxes, which were said to be few in numbers.”

Surprised by Oz’s methods, Ein glanced back at the documents.

“The magic stones that you showed me the other day were another discovery from that investigation, correct?” the boy asked. “There are traces of them in Magna, Ist, and near Barth, the Adventurer’s Town.”

There were also records of red foxes appearing in rural farming villages that were seemingly in the middle of nowhere. Upon reviewing this information, it wouldn’t be odd if Sage was being

manipulated by a red fox lurking in the shadows.

“To tell you the truth, I expected them to be more hidden away,” Ein admitted.

“For better or for worse, red foxes are a hedonistic species. Unfortunately for them, it means that quite a few of them live rather freely,” Oz explained. “Some will be simple, diligent readers, while others specialize in specific topics in the search of more knowledge. However, there are those who’d prefer to grab a spear and hone their martial prowess.”

“I see. That’s very informative.”

“That stack of papers tells you all I know, yet it seems that I’ve gone on at length. I apologize. It seems that it’s a bad habit of aging researchers like myself to continue chatting away.”

“Oh, please don’t be sorry! It’s all very useful!”

“I’m glad you think that way. Ah, and here’s another bundle of documents for you.” Oz took out another thick envelope and handed it to Ein. “This contains knowledge on monsterification; more precisely, these documents focus on the process related to monster evolution. As I’d thought, there isn’t a single instance like yours, Your Highness. Perhaps the documents from the other day might be more useful than these.”

“That’s not true! I’m so grateful for all the knowledge you’ve provided!”

“I recommend you head to Barth in the future. There’s quite a bit of information on monster evolution out that way. It would be useful to look into what the adventurers know as well, not just the knowledge of us researchers.”

“I see... Barth might have some more information on the red foxes too.”

“Precisely. I think you’d be killing two birds with one stone.”

Ein nodded in an attempt to confirm he’d received the second report. But just as he did, Chris stepped in to stop him.

“Sir Ein, we should return to the knights’ station!” she said.

“Oh, is my time up already?” Ein asked.

“We must depart for the royal capital by evening, so we’re a bit short on time.” She apologetically bowed to Oz. “Thank you so much for all your cooperation with the royal family despite our arrival on such short notice. I guarantee that His Majesty will have a proper reward prepared and one of our castle’s knights will visit you at a later date. I would be grateful if you could spare some of your time once more.”

“This was an incredibly insightful meeting for me as well. The reward is unnecessary, but I understand,” Oz said.

Ein stood up. “Professor Oz, thank you for everything. I hope we

have a chance to meet again.”

“Ah,” the professor replied as he got up and approached his desk. “A moment, please. I actually have a gift for you, Your Highness. Perhaps it’s best if Dame Christina holds on to it.”

“Me?” Chris asked before the realization hit her. “Professor Oz, you don’t mean this is...”

“Indeed,” Oz said with a nod. “This is a red fox’s magic stone, just as I had shown you.”

“But...are you sure about this? I’m sure this is extremely valuable.”

The marshal appeared to be acting a tad reserved, as she didn’t reach out for the item, but Oz practically pushed the ornately decorated box onto her.

“It’s not a problem at all,” he said. “I’ve already finished my research on it and I’m sure it will be of great use to His Highness in the future.”

What a generous man. I’m glad I chose to rely on him. Ein expressed his gratitude by bowing his head alongside his marshal.

“Thank you for everything, truly,” Ein said. “I cannot express my gratitude to you enough.”

Oz laughed. “Your Highness, you mustn’t bow your head.”

“Please allow me to. I will never forget your kindness.”

“I found my meeting with you to be very fulfilling as well, Your Highness. If our paths ever cross again, I hope we can sit down for a proper meal.”

“Of course. Should the opportunity arise, I would love to dine with you.” Ein looked at the clock. “Apologies, it seems we really are short on time. I’m sorry for our hasty visit.”

“Not at all. Please be careful on your trip back to the royal capital.”

Ein bowed his head once more and left the professor’s office.

Steam blew out of the water train as it prepared to leave. Gasping for breath, Ein and Chris were scrambling for their train car with their luggage in hand.

“Mroooow! Hurry, mew two! Come on!” Katima cried, peeking out from one of the train’s windows. She’d already boarded a good while ago.

“I-I know!” Ein yelled back.

Upon hearing the departure bell, the panicked duo picked up the pace and hopped on just as the train was pulling away.

“Hah... Hah... W-We made it,” Chris huffed.

“That was way too close... If we didn’t make it, I would’ve just

spent the day touring the city before leaving tomorrow,” Ein replied.

“You mustn’t. Everyone will be angry with you.”

“I know. I’m just trying to put on a tough face.”

Chris quietly handed her handkerchief to the prince, who used it to wipe the sweat off his brow. The marshal did the same.

“I’ll drop off our luggage,” Chris said. “Sir Ein, you may go to the lounge and rest.”

“Got it,” Ein replied. “Thank you.”

The prince walked through the corridors to find Dill and Katima waiting for him in the lounge.

“Good grief! That really was a close call, mew know!” the first princess scolded.

“I’m sorry,” Ein said. “There was something I had to pass along to the knights.”

“Meow? And what’s that?”

“I wanted them to prioritize their search for Sage. He disappeared without leaving a trace.”

“I see. If the crown prince personally went out of his way to make that request, I suppaws that’s pretty important.”

“Exactly.”

Ein sat across from Katima, who was sitting on a sofa.

“Sir Ein, shall I fetch you a cold drink?” Dill asked.

“Ah, yes please. Could you bring two of them? One will be for Chris,” Ein requested.

“Of course.”

Dill gave a faint smile and headed to the bar in a corner of the lounge. At that moment, only Ein’s party was in the car. Truthfully, one should fetch their own beverages, but this space was reserved for aristocrats who traveled with servants to assist them. Once he had his drink in hand, Ein gulped it down right away.

“Whew, that really hits the spot,” he said as he caught his breath.

He gazed outside, noticing that Ist was growing smaller and smaller.

“Just moments ago, we walked through that city after sneaking into that massive tower,” Ein murmured.

The size of the solemn tower was impressive, even at a distance. The prince praised himself for running up and down the stairs of that colossal monolith.

“Mrow. And you destroyed the furnace too,” Katima said, causing Ein to laugh. “Goodness. This trip was just full of surpurrisers.”

The princess looked around wearily before she changed subjects. “By the way, we reserved another train car for Bara and May. I told them to relax and take it easy, but do mew want to go visit them?” She glanced at a separate corridor. “Just go beyond that passageway

and mew should see them. They're able to visit the dining car as well."

However, one needed a train ticket to visit other cars. A magical tool barred their paths.

"I don't think I'll bother them," Ein said. "But Aunt Katima..."

"Hm?"

"I know this is coming a bit late, but thank you for getting everything arranged for the kids. From clothing to whatever else they might've needed." The prince turned to Dill. "You also called on the influence of the House of Gracier, didn't you, Dill? Thank you. It was a tremendous help."

"Mya ha ha! Mew don't need to worry about stuff like that!"

"Indeed," Dill added. "Nothing would make me happier than to be of use to you, Sir Ein."

Ein smiled at his trusty comrades. As the prince settled in, Chris returned from dropping off the luggage.

"Chris, I had Dill get a drink ready for you," Ein said.

"Really?" the marshal said happily. "I was just getting thirsty." She thanked Dill.

"Oh, and Aunt Katima," Ein said.

"Mrow?"

"We received something invaluable from Professor Oz. We received a red fox's magic stone."

"What?! How could mew receive something like that so casually?!" The princess lay on the sofa in an exaggerated manner. "Is the stone propurrly sealed? I wouldn't want mew to accidentally absorb it!"

"I think that won't be an issue," Chris said. "The stone is being stored in my room and has been secured with one of Majorica's seals."

"Good. Ein, I understand that you'll want to visit Chris's room tonight, but mew must endure that urge for meow."

"I'm not gonna do that," Ein replied.

Chris let out a forced laugh in response to the royals' exchange, but she secretly felt her cheeks growing a touch warmer. She clutched her drink with both hands and took a sip in an attempt to hide her face. Suddenly, Katima's stomach started to growl.

"Mew misheard," Katima said.

"Hm? What?" Ein asked.

"I'm not hungry. I'm just...trembling with excitement."

Amid the dry laughter, Katima looked away and slumped her shoulders.

"I have no idea what you mean, but I think we should eat," Ein said. "Why don't we have dinner? The four of us can call for room service."

Bara and May flashed across his mind.

“Oh, we should have dinner prepared for the girls too,” he said.

“Mrow, no need for that,” Katima replied. “May was famished, so we had them eat earlier this evening.”

“Oh. Then we shouldn’t bother them.”

“I told them to call furr us should anything happen. I don’t think we need to worry too much about them.”

Ein, Katima, and their pair of knights proceeded to chatter away as they enjoyed their supper. The quartet looked back on their time in Ist while relaxing in the lounge, the water train slowly chugging along.

It had been a few hours since Ein’s party had departed Ist by water train. As they gazed outside, the four could see a beautiful nighttime cityscape from out in the distance, as if speckles of gold were strewn across the dark-blue night sky. Given that the train’s surroundings were much chillier than the royal capital, the lounge car’s windows were cold to the touch.

“So what mew’re saying is based on Professor Oz’s monster research...” Katima said with the stack of documents that made up Oz’s reports in front of her.

Seated on the sofa, the first princess was looking into documents related to Ein’s monsterification. Any information they had on the red foxes had been set aside for the moment.

“Right,” Ein said. “It seems that the monster’s mind is in no danger of being lost. Even when it evolves.”

“Hm... So, at the very least, it seems mew won’t lose your sense of self then, Ein.”

“Wait, does that mean that monsterification is—”

“But that’s only if we treat your monsterification as a form of evolution,” Katima interjected.

“Right. I guess we aren’t out of the woods yet. There’s no guarantee that I’ll be safe.”

“Purreciscely This is an unprecedented case anyways. We should carefully look into it and make sure that mew never fall into another coma!”

In other words, research into Ein’s health was far from over. Standing nearby, Chris and Dill nodded in response to the Cait-Sìth’s words.

“According to Professor Oz, your next stop should be the Adventurer’s Town, no? Mrow... Indeed, if we were to research your health furrther and look for more leads on the red foxes, a trip to Barth would kill two birds with one stone.”

“I guess so,” Ein replied.

“Once the matters purraining to your body calm down, we might be able to focus primarily on the red foxes. If we are to presume that the red foxes are backing Sage, it’s proof that they’re still hiding away in Ishtarica.”

Everyone gave a solemn nod at Katima’s words.

“All right, then. Let’s go to sleep, hm?” the first princess suggested.

She yawned and stood up. While a lot had happened in Ist, it appeared that the prince’s party were staying up a bit too late talking about it—the lounge car’s clock indicated that it was already one o’clock in the morning.

“I’ll head to bed too,” Ein said, before he noted, “Ah, we’re already on the bridge again, aren’t we?”

He looked outside to discover that the train was indeed gliding across Ishtarica’s longest bridge—the same bridge Chris had mentioned on the way to Ist. As the train drew closer to the royal capital, Ein noticed a gentle slope ahead which he hadn’t seen on the initial train ride. Bubbles then started to surface on the starlit river.

Is something there? As Ein continued to stand by the window, the train suddenly hit its brakes; the wheels screeched as they came to a halt on the groaning tracks. Ein gasped in surprise.

“Sir Ein, watch out!” Dill called out as he stepped in to support the prince.

“Th-Thank you,” Ein replied.

“No problem at all. But why did they suddenly brake?”

The lounge’s furniture had been shaken about, with glasses rolling off tables and shattering on the ground.

“I’m fine too!” Katima called out as Chris jumped in to support her as well.

“Something must’ve happened. I’ll go take a look,” Chris said.

“Mrow. Please do, Chris!”

“Wait, I’ll go too!” Ein insisted. “I don’t think I can sleep like this. Dill, would you please look after Katima?”

“O-Of course... I’m not really looking after her, but guarding her,” Dill replied.

Ein and Chris donned their robes before walking through the train’s corridors. As expected, the other passengers appeared to be in a bit of a panic; the fuss only grew louder as the pair approached the dining car.

A man who looked to be the conductor came out to explain the situation to the passengers.

“We had to hit the emergency brakes!” he called out. “I’ve been informed that a large monster has just cut across the tracks!”

Ein and Chris listened on as the conductor desperately tried to inform the crowd.

“That monster is now flying around!” the conductor said.

“Then why aren’t we fleeing?!” a passenger demanded.

“It’s because the monster’s flying is blocking the path!”

Ein hadn’t expected anything like this to happen. He turned to Chris and spoke honestly to her.

“What are the chances that this monster is after us?” Ein asked.

“What a coincidence,” the elf replied. “I had the same thought.”

Though that man had escaped justice at the Tower of Wisdom, he had returned.

“Then we should leave immediately,” Ein started.

“You mustn’t!” Chris replied. “We’re on a bridge with no other escape routes available to us...and if it’s really him after us, he must be riding a wyv—”

The marshal was cut off by a loud rumble and crackle. A pair of large talons had gripped the carriage, shattering windows and letting the cold winds blow inside.

“I want to believe that I’m wrong, but I feel like he’s telling us to come out,” Ein said.

“S-Sir Ein, I have no plan to take you outside with me!” Chris whispered in his ear.

“What are you saying? He’s after the both of us. It’ll be the same wherever I go, so we should take a path that causes minimal damage to our fellow passengers. Countless lives will be lost if he decides to trip the train off the tracks and throw it into the river.”

Ein then approached a window.

“E-Excuse me, please step away! It’s dangerous!” the conductor called out.

However, there wasn’t much time to act. A strong gust of wind blew back the hoods of the crown prince and marshal, exposing their identities. The other passengers could only stare at them in shock.

“Don’t worry,” Ein assured them. “We’ll be fine.”

Before the crowd’s very eyes was the hero who had triumphed over the Sea Dragon alongside a powerful lady they all knew well. She was none other than Ishtarica’s newly appointed marshal and strongest knight, Christina Wernstein. While the passengers couldn’t understand why the pair stood before them, the duo’s presence was reassuring.

“Chris, let’s report back to Dill first!” Ein yelled, before the pair dashed out of the dining car.

They were running along glass-covered passageways when they ran into Dill. He had also heard the loud noise and had stepped out to act.

“Sir Ein! We’re under attack!” Dill reported.

“I know! Stay by Katima’s side!” Ein ordered. “Wait, get Bara and May as well. Protect them all in the same room!”

“Y-Yes, Your Highness! But what about you?!”

“I think that monster is after both me and Chris, so...”

The young Gracier’s face morphed into a state of shock when the realization hit him. However, the prince’s determined visage led the knight to stand back and turn to Chris instead.

“Dame Chris, please take care of Sir Ein,” Dill said.

“Yes, of course!”

From the opposite end of the train, the conductor ran out to meet with the prince and his knights.

“Please wait, Your Highness!” he called out.

But Ein wouldn’t listen. “I’d like to make a request,” the crown prince said. “We’ll go outside and lure the enemy away. When you’re able to get the train moving again, would you please do so?”

As Ein had stated earlier, the entire train taking a dip in the river would be the worst-case scenario. Without a moment to spare, the prince jumped out of the broken window.

“If you need anything, talk to Dill, my personal knight! Let’s go, Chris!” Ein called out as he nimbly made his way out of the train.

Hopping onto the train’s roof was quite the task, as each carriage easily dwarfed a human ladder of full-sized adults. Ein used his Phantom Hands to fling himself to the rooftop, while Chris ascended with a singular, graceful leap.

“I humbly request that you don’t employ the same strategy you used against the Sea Dragon, all right?”

“I know. Look, there he is.”

A sole wyvern hovered before them, the veins of its magnificent, outstretched wings pulsing against the night sky. The surrounding starlight was reflected by the beast’s crimson body, revealing that it was now much burlier than before. The wyvern’s large, bloodshot eyes locked onto the pair on the train below it. Puffs of white were expelled from its mouth as the wyvern bared its fangs, a sign that the beast was rather warm.

“GRAAAAAH!” the wyvern loudly roared, causing even the skies to tremble.

Ein and Chris could feel the hair on the back of their necks stand up straight.

“It was terrified of me at the Monster Arena!” Ein stated. “But it’s completely changed!”

“We should put it out of its misery,” Chris said.

As the pair unsheathed their blades, the wyvern descended and prepared its talons to strike.



“GRAH!” the wyvern bellowed, its razor-sharp talons aimed right at the prince.

Chris narrowed her eyes and took a step forward.

“I won’t let you!” she yelled.

Quick as a flash, she struck the wyvern. While it hadn’t shattered, the monster’s talon now had a large crack running through it. The beast let out an earsplitting cry as a talon fragment shot off and grazed Chris’s ear.

“Nice one, Chris!” Ein said.

“N-No, I planned on shattering its talon, but...” Chris started.

She had only managed to crack it. The marshal was extremely proud of her rapier, as it was a light weapon forged from precious mithril. A single slash of her blade could’ve easily subdued any average monster.

“G-GRRR...” The wyvern landed on the train’s roof and continued its attempts to intimidate the pair.

Ein and Chris braced themselves once the train had gotten back underway; the vehicle’s gentle clatter could be heard as it ran along the tracks.

“I would’ve preferred it to stay afraid of me!” Ein said, summoning six Phantom Hands.

We should keep attacking it. That way it won’t have the chance to think about targeting the passengers. The crown prince took a deep breath.

“I’ll blind it for a moment, then we’ll attack when there’s an opening!” Ein said.

“Blind it?” Chris asked. However, she quickly understood what he was going for. “Ah, you’ll be using one of your skills!”

“Exactly!”

Ein summoned a dense puff of Thick Fog and the mist blew towards the wyvern, enveloping its entire body.

“Now!” Ein said.

“All right!” Chris replied.

The prince launched himself at the beast, proceeding to restrain its wings with his Phantom Hands. The wyvern was now wide open.

“Chris!”

The marshal unleashed a series of rapid thrusts into the wyvern’s chest, with her third thrust tearing a hole in its chest. A fountain of blood rained down upon the pair, dyeing their clothes the same shade of red.

“GRAAAH!”

“It’s not over yet!” Chris called out.

Ein grimaced as the wyvern struggled to shake the boy off. “I

didn't know you were this strong!" However, the prince was able to maintain his grip. "Sorry to say, but I've dealt with a monster that was way more resilient than you! I'm not letting go until you're down!"

This wyvern's strength couldn't possibly be compared to the might of a Sea Dragon. As Chris continued to lend her assistance, Ein poured more power into his Phantom Hands. Despite the boy's best efforts, the beast viciously whipped its tail about in another attempt to fight back.

"Damn it!" he yelled.

"We should step back for now!" Chris said. "I've already landed several blows on it!"

"Oka— Huh?"

Ein managed to defend against the flailing tail with his Phantom Hands, but he was thrown into the air. At this rate, he'd fall into the water while the train continued to speed along the bridge. The river was quite calm, but its cold waters would quickly sap the boy's stamina.

"*GRAAAAAH!*" the wyvern roared, turning to the defenseless Ein.

The beast shook its wings about while the veins of its bulging muscles violently pulsated. It was making a beeline for the boy, but Chris had managed to sneak up on the beast from behind—an angle wide open for attack.

"You mustn't forget about me!" she shouted.

Her blade pierced the tip of the wyvern's tail.

"*GRRR!*"

"Your tail is rather soft, it seems!" Chris yelled. "Then I guess I'll help myself!"

Her supersonic slashes whittled down the tail until it was completely severed from the wyvern's body. Then with a deafening thud, the beast fell to the ground in agony.

"Thanks, Chris!" Ein said, using his Phantom Hands to return to the marshal's side.

A sharp breeze brushed against their cheeks as the battle atop the train settled down.

"Are you all right?" Chris asked.

"Yup. No problems at all," Ein replied.

The elf breathed a sigh of relief. "In any case, that monster is much too sturdy."

Despite the number of holes punched in its chest and the alarming amount of blood it was losing, the wyvern's haggard breathing implied it was still able to fight back.

"This isn't normal!" Chris said, sweat forming on her brow.

"But I'm sure we can beat it. We just need to tire it out one more time!"

“Indeed. We must defeat it!”

Things had been progressing smoothly in their favor until now. But then...

“G-GRAAAAAAH!”

The monster was enveloped in a pale-blue light as it outstretched its wings and raised its arms to the sky. The worst had occurred—Chris’s barrage of fatal blows was starting to heal, with wounds closing as if she had never even left a scratch.

“GR?!”

At the moment its wounds were healed, the beast shuddered as it glanced at the water. However, the prince and his marshal were more concerned with the apparently unscathed monster before them.

“No way! It healed?!” Ein yelled.

“I-I’ve never seen a monster do that before!” Chris yelled in shock.

“How can we beat it?!”

Believing that he was out of options, Ein suddenly noticed the presence of a magic stone nestled in the wyvern’s forehead. Meanwhile, the beast’s body was growing in size, as were its ever-sharpening talons.

“Chris! Let’s aim for the stone in its forehead and end this!” Ein shouted.

“The forehead? It’s a bit tricky, but it seems we have no other choice.”

They were now presented with a new problem: how would they destroy the stone? *Should we use Chris’s rapier or my Phantom Hands?* In the end, the prince chose to rely on the expert swordsmanship of his marshal—one of the nation’s strongest knights. As for the prince himself, he’d support her by other means.

“Chris, can you draw all of your power and channel it into a single devastating thrust?” Ein asked.

“If I use my wind magic, I’m sure I can...”

“Then I’ll hold it down while you deliver the final blow.”

This was Ein’s specialty; his encounter with the academy’s Red Bison and the sacrifices he’d made to defeat the Sea Dragon were proof of this. While the wyvern growled, Ein approached the beast with his tendrils spread out like a spider’s web.

“GRAAAH!”

“I’ll leave the timing to you, Chris!” Ein yelled, jumping forward.

“H-Huh?! Wait, Sir Ein!” Chris called out.

“I’m pretty confident of how I’ll fare in a test of strength, wyvern!”

The beast fought back with sharp talons that protruded from the edge of its wings, but Ein was able to fight it away with one of his Phantom Hands. Meanwhile, Ein used his other tendrils to constrict

the wyvern's wings and legs—it wasn't getting out of the boy's hold. The wyvern tried to close the gap between itself and the prince, but no amount of enhancements could bring it anywhere near the might of a Sea Dragon. Ein had grown stronger since that encounter anyways, and he still had strength to spare while grappling with the monster. But this battle of strength would quickly come to an end if he fell in the water.

"What's wrong, wyvern?!" Ein taunted, trying to amp himself while remaining vigilant. "You can't beat me with that pathetic amount of power!"

"GRAAAH! GAAAAAH!"

Sensing that its current strength just wasn't going to cut it, the wyvern wrenched its neck, bared its fangs, and prepared to take a chunk out of the crown prince. However, the boy's tendrils weren't going to let that happen. The excited Ein's breathing had grown haggard.

"Hah... I'll be okay! I can do this!"

"GRRR! GRAR! GAAAH!"

Ein suddenly felt the wind gathering behind him, apparently blowing from the opposite direction. Upon taking note of the strange phenomenon, the prince noticed that the wind was rushing for Chris's rapier. Ein felt the breeze sting his skin as the gusts grew stronger and stronger. Then with a loud roar, Chris rushed to his side.

"Thank you for buying me some time! I'm ready to kill the beast with this blow!" Chris declared.

"Okay! I'll leave the rest to you!"

Chris leaped in the air and her right hand grew blurry for a split second as a powerful whirlwind surrounded her blade—the slightest tap was almost guaranteed to rip the monster to shreds. Cowering in fear, the wyvern shifted its gaze from the boy to his marshal. The beast's instincts told it that it had to take a bite out of the elf.

"I won't let you!" Ein yelled.

It was time—Ein had studied the beast's movements in a desperate bid to defeat it. He loosened the Phantom Hand on the wyvern's wings before recoiling the tendril around the monster's neck, locking it in place. The crimson beast wasn't going anywhere now.

"GR?!"

The wyvern panicked, as it could feel itself suffocating along with its body starting to teeter.

"I'm sorry, pitiful wyvern," Chris said. "This is the only thing we can do to spare you."

In its last moments, the wyvern's eyes softened. Upon hearing Chris's apology, the monster couldn't offer a bit of resistance—the woman appeared as a merciful goddess to the creature. With nothing

in the way, the marshal plunged her rapier deep into its forehead.

“G-GRAH...”

The wyvern died a near-painless death as water rippled in the wind. When inspecting the monster’s forehead, Ein noticed that a gaping hole had been torn straight through it. After the train stopped due to the strong winds, the wyvern quietly fell onto the train’s roof before it rolled into the river below. How did it feel when its freedom was taken away? Ein had won the battle, but his heart was heavy.

“Sir Ein,” Chris said.

“Ah, um, it was an impressive blow, Chris.”

“Thank you. It’s all thanks to you,” the marshal replied with a giggle.

“Ugh, I’m exhausted.”

“Ah ha ha, as am I. I’d love to take a bath and head to bed.”

“Me too. We beat the wyvern, so why don’t head in—”

Suddenly, the water rippled as something started to emerge from the depths. Still fixated on the battle, the pair remembered something they’d heard while in Ist: Sage had said that he could control wyverns *and* krakens. The train was riding above the river and the wyvern was slain, but...

“That good-for-nothing viscount!” Ein roared. The boy saw tentacles coming for him from below—tentacles much thicker than his Phantom Hands. “This was why the wyvern faltered? It was afraid of the kraken?!”

The sea dweller held the wyvern’s corpse in one of its tentacles before quickly tossing the beast’s remains into its massive maw. The kraken’s tentacles had also destroyed the train tracks, blocking the path forward and trapping the train on the bridge.

“It seems that there’s one more battle for us to fight, Sir Ein,” Chris murmured.

“Yeah,” Ein agreed. “That kraken matches the size you mentioned earlier, so I think we can handle it without any weapons.”

The battlefield was the main issue.

“How do we attack it?” Ein asked.

“Our only option is to cut down its outstretched tentacles. Allow me to demonstrate,” Chris said, noticing a tentacle creeping up behind her prince. “Like this!”

Ein only saw a flash of silver approach his face. When he turned around, the tentacle was sliced to pieces.

“If we can’t fight against it, I’m guessing it’ll try to take the entire train down with it,” Chris said.

As she swung her wind-enchanted rapier to her side, the kraken’s tentacles were instantly shredded and fell to the ground.

“If that happens, I’ll go with the Sea Dragon strategy...but I’d

prefer to keep that from happening.” Ein noted.

Unease filled his chest as he tried to remain calm. Suddenly, his gaze was caught by something just past the gentle slopes ahead—a single horse-drawn carriage.

“Sage!” Ein growled.

The viscount had a bonfire prepared as though to mock the prince. He was lounging with a drink in hand as he looked on at the scene unfolding. Ein could only furiously gaze back at the man.

“That man sure has a nasty hobby,” Chris said.

“He’s a cunning one, not to mention his personality being a perfect fit for his shady dealings,” Ein replied.

“Indeed. Given his decision to have a kraken attack us here, his personality is just as nasty.”

“Well, I’ve still got some power to spare.”

Chris giggled. “Good grief. But you are looking a little tired.”

“The same could be said for you.”

The pair shifted their focus back to the tentacles outstretched above the bridge. *I should’ve brought a bigger sword*, Ein thought, clenching his blade.

“*Want me to lend you one?*”

This time, a man’s voice echoed throughout Ein’s head. The boy thought this to be the Dullahan. The presence seemed to carry no malicious intent, its low and calm tones fitting for that of an adult man. Ein felt a sense of relief, realizing that the Elder Lich’s promises rang true. *But I don’t want to turn to you two right away!* And with that, the presence disappeared.

“Let’s do this, Chris!” Ein said.

“Of course!” the marshal replied.

However, the river started to rumble once the duo had made up their minds. A pair of monsters appeared to be heading straight for them.

“You think he brought three krakens?” Ein asked.

“Sage never said that he had just one,” the elf replied.

“I see. So I guess there’s that possibility.”

That would indeed be the worst-case scenario. They were already fighting on disadvantageous terrain, and the thought of fighting multiple krakens at once wasn’t very appealing to the duo. Ein didn’t want to consider it, but there was a real chance that some passengers could be caught in the cross fire. He bit his lip, thinking that he might have to rely on the Dullahan’s power in this situation.

“This is the only way...” he muttered, thinking it would be better than nothing. Ein resolved himself and turned to the tentacles, but he noticed that the atmosphere around him had shifted. “Huh?”

The tentacles weren’t attacking the bridge or the train—instead,

they had moved to protect the monster's body. The pair appeared to be shocked by this turn of events.

"Well, this is odd..." Chris noted.

"I wonder what happened?" Ein wondered.

The reason soon became clear, as a monster flipped out of the water like a dolphin and let out an adorable cry.

"Rawr!"

Ein was familiar with that lovable screech—it belonged to the Sea Dragon twins, who were supposed to be in the royal capital. The second Sea Dragon popped out of the water to do a flip of its own.

Was the wyvern actually trembling because of the twins? The kraken was clearly taken off guard by their appearance.

"It's afraid of the babies?!" a shocked Ein asked.

"It seems like it..." Chris murmured. "While the kraken is said to be the tyrant of the seas, the Sea Dragon is its only natural predator."

"But they're still so young!"

Chris didn't show an ounce of worry. "No need for concern. I'm sure they'd have no trouble handling the kraken. Remember the Sea Dragon you saw after your field trip? It devoured a kraken in one gulp."

"Yeah, but..."

That Sea Dragon was a full-grown adult, while the twins were still infants.

"Rar! Rar!"

"Rawr!"

As the twins locked eyes with Ein, they swam in circles with joy at the sight of their father. It was an adorable sight made humorous by the presence of a trembling kraken. The only resistance the kraken could muster was a weak stretch of a tentacle. With all his strength burned up, Ein collapsed onto the roof.

"I'm wondering what we should do next," he said.

"Why don't we watch over them? If the kraken comes this way, we'll just need to deal with it then," Chris suggested as she sat down beside him.

"Rarr!"

El, the older sister, aggressively swam around the tentacle and sliced through it with ease. As the kraken shrieked with horror, the twins munched on the fresh tentacle with gusto.

"Whoa..." Ein said.

This was completely one-sided; the kraken was now trapped in a whirlpool with no way out.

"I guess that's the power of a real Sea Dragon," Ein said in awe. The river's current had been expertly manipulated.

"I've heard it said that when Sea Dragons appear, the kraken

population tends to drastically dip,” Chris explained. “One theory suggests that krakens are a Sea Dragon’s favorite meal.”

“The so-called tyrant is nowhere in sight,” Ein murmured.

The other tentacles had been hacked away and devoured by the twins. Thinking he could leave the monster to his beloved children, Ein stood up.

“Why don’t we capture the man behind this all?” Ein suggested. Chris nodded and rushed ahead.

“Krone was right after all,” the crown prince muttered.

True to her words during their date, the twins had come to his aid when he needed it most. Ein smiled, as his love had seemingly prophesied the future. Back at the royal capital, she was patiently awaiting his return, even though he was still quite a ways away. As he thought about her, he looked up at the night sky. *I’ll see you again soon.*

When Ein finally caught up with Chris, he was shocked to discover that the viscount’s carriage had been knocked over. Similarly, the man’s servants and knights were out cold. As for Sage himself, he sat on sandy grass with the marshal’s rapier pointed right at him. Perhaps he’d tried to fight back upon the elf’s approach, but regardless, his bonfire was nothing but smoke gently rising to the sky now. The braggart was looking away from Chris’s icy gaze.

“Amazing,” Ein said, faintly smiling. His enemy had been subdued in a blink of an eye.

Thinking back on the elf’s devastating blow to the wyvern’s head, Ein took another moment to recognize his marshal’s talents.

“We’ll be taking you to prison, Sage,” Ein said.

“To prison? A viscount such as myself? Quit spouting nonsense,” Sage retorted.

“I’m not kidding at all. We’re taking you to the royal capital.”

“And how will you charge me? Arresting an aristocrat requires quite a bit of authority.” As the passing breeze blew a pleasant, earthy scent about, Sage let out a boisterous laugh. The gall possessed by this man was nothing but appalling. “Who are you anyway? You won’t even show me your face, child.”

Even without his hood, Ein’s face was obscured under the twinkling night sky. Meanwhile, Chris’s hair was a mess and she was drenched in the wyvern’s blood—the viscount had no idea about their identities. The only time Sage had caught a good glimpse of the elf was when her hood had fallen off for a brief moment back in Ist. As Ein stepped forward, the glimmering stars finally managed to illuminate his face.

“You’re an aristocrat, aren’t you? Then you’ll surely recognize my face,” Ein demanded.

There wasn’t a single aristocrat unfamiliar with the crown prince’s visage. Unable to hide his surprise, Sage opened and closed his mouth like a fish.

“Answer me,” Ein ordered. “You recognize my face, do you not?”

The viscount fell silent before he finally muttered, “I do.”

“You have a steep mountain of crimes to confess to... And you’ll tell me everything once we’re back at the royal capital.”

The viscount had no choice but to surrender. Why was the crown prince even here in the first place? A flurry of questions swirled in his mind and he needed time to process the situation. However, Sage was able to tell he was out of options at the very least. The man hung his head, leading Ein and Chris to believe this case was closed.

“Why did the true mastermind order you to abduct people?” Ein asked.

“Because...that’s what they wanted,” Sage replied.

“They?”

“I...will become their hands and abduct them... I’ve...already received...payment.” Sage’s voice and speaking mannerisms suddenly changed as he spoke in short bursts. “I... I-I-I... Gh...”

He abruptly fell to the ground in agony as he scratched at his throat in pain. Sage’s face had turned a deep purple.

“Ugh... Gah... Save...”

Tears of blood streamed down the viscount’s face as he begged to be spared. But before Ein could lend a hand, the wide-eyed viscount drew his final breath—a horrific sight. The prince quickly noticed that Sage’s men had perished as well.

“They were scapegoated and cut off, it seems...” Chris murmured as she sheathed her rapier. “We should contact the nearest city. Aside from these corpses, we also have to attend to the damage done to the bridge.”

The marshal gently spoke to her stunned prince, taking his hand in an attempt to cheer him up. Silence fell between the pair; Ein could feel that Chris’s actions said, “As long as I’m by your side, everything will be all right.” From there, he was slowly able to calm down.

“Raaarr!”

“Raaawr!”

Adorable cries could be heard coming from a nearby river behind them.

“It seems like they’re calling out to their father, Sir Ein!” Chris cheerfully said.

“Yeah. They came to save me, after all. I should thank them,” Ein replied.

The marshal chuckled. "Indeed. They really did save us the effort."

"But I'm still curious about one thing."

After walking over to them, Ein patted the heads of his scaly babies.

"I'm happy that you guys came to save me. Was it because you wanted some juicy kraken, or did you sense my presence and decide to help me?"

"Rarr?"

"Rawr?"

"Hey, don't play dumb! Answer me!"

"Pft... Sir Ein, you mustn't get angry," Chris said with a snicker. "They take after their father, I believe."

"Huh?! So you're saying they take after me?!"

No matter the reason, the twins had aided the crown prince today.

"Maybe they heard from someone that you'd be home soon," Chris suggested.

"Even so, it's impressive that they came all this way," Ein replied, gazing into the water.

As he saw the half-eaten corpse of the kraken floating on the surface, he knew that this had indeed been a one-sided match.

Dill and Katima rushed out of the train upon hearing news that the battle was over. They still had a lot of loose ends to tie up, but Ein and Chris both cracked a little smile as they watched Katima struggling to leap over the destroyed bridge.

Meanwhile, a man held a glass of bloodred wine as he gazed at the red fox's magic stone on the table in front of him. He indulged himself in a fit of delight.

"Ah, father. What a wonderful day it is," he said, downing the wine in a single gulp. "Despite coming to me for assistance, that man brought himself to commit crude and lowly acts. I had bequeathed to him the honorable role of 'research associate,' yet his eyes were clouded by greed."

He rubbed his cheek against the magic stone.

"And I even managed to say farewell to that dirty fox woman's stone. Ah, what a wonderful day! That crown prince was a noble and beautiful young man. Simply wonderful... He's as beautiful as you are, father!"

The man stuck out his tongue and licked the stone.

"I'm so excited... Indeed! This reminds me of the time when I slaughtered the fox woman by your side before I bathed in your blood! Oh, I'm ecstatic!"

He rubbed his cheek against the stone and licked it again before enjoying the scent it emanated.

He panted with joy as his face turned pink and his pulse rate rose. It took some time for him to calm down as he indulged in the excited jolts zapping his lower body.

“Is this the good fortune that you bestowed upon me, my beloved father?!” he cried as though he were in a play. “Ahhh! I simply cannot stay put! I can’t contain this surge of emotions! You continue to tickle my knowledge, Your Highness, the crown prince! I’m just dying to see your face contort! No, no! I must love such a beautiful existence. It would be utter blasphemy to point my distorted love towards him!”

He chugged down the rest of his bottle of wine. His breathing grew haggard as he gathered his matted hair and mindlessly glanced around the room with a twisted smile.

There was a knock on the door.

“Come in,” the man said in a calm voice.

His previous excited demeanor was nowhere to be seen; it was as though he transformed into a completely different person. The door silently opened.

“Pardon me. The knights would like to speak with you regarding the recent incident at the Tower of Wisdom. What shall we do?” a person asked.

“Tell them that I’ll be by the station tomorrow. You may reply to them immediately,” the man replied.

The person bowed. “Understood. Then please excuse me, Chairman Oz.”

Epilogue

Perhaps due to the collapse of their daily routines or the rash of incidents involving Sage, Ein and Chris were having trouble sleeping. It would take a little while for the train track to be repaired, and the valiant duo were dying for a shower upon their return. After rinsing off, the pair met in the lounge as planned.

“I guess you couldn’t sleep either, Chris...” Ein muttered. “What’s with the outfit?”

“U-U-Um... I have my reasons! I couldn’t wear my other clothes, so I decided to wear these for the time being and...”

Chris’s silky blonde hair was down for a change, giving off an aura that was a different kind of charming from usual. Also out of the usual was the long, tight, crimson dress she had donned—accentuating her hourglass figure, ample bosom, and desirable assets. Her slender legs protruded under the garment as she carried herself with grace. The pure and innocent marshal usually didn’t care much for the eyes of the opposite sex, but her current appearance was rather alluring. She squirmed around sheepishly, drawing further attention to her bosom. His marshal’s embarrassment had left the prince with a sense of relief—she hadn’t changed one bit.

“I think it suits you really well,” Ein said. “There’s nothing for you to feel embarrassed about.”

Ein felt it would be rude if he didn’t make note of her appearance. Additionally, he wanted to let her know that she looked spectacular in that dress.

“Um, thank you,” Chris replied. “Wh-Why don’t we get something to drink? I shall prepare something for you immediately.”

The elf sat down at the bar for a moment and soon returned with drinks in hand.

“Were you unable to sleep as well, Sir Ein?” she asked.

“Yeah, I just couldn’t feel sleepy,” Ein confessed.

“I understand. I couldn’t either,” the marshal giggled. As she tilted her head to the side slightly, she looked like a goddess in her attire. “Why don’t we give a little toast? Quite a few things have happened, but we’ve finished our investigation in Ist. I think that calls for a small celebration.”

“That’s true. Then cheers!”

A gentle clink rang through the air, celebrating the pair’s

achievements. Ein placed his glass down first while Chris was still sipping her drink. He was drawn to her fingers as they clenched the stem of her flute wine glass. She put her glass down gently so as to not make a sound; her well-taught manners and etiquette were apparent. The two indulged in their feelings of victory for a short while.

“Professor Oz helped us out quite a bit,” Ein said, breaking the silence.

“Indeed. I’m so glad and very relieved,” Chris replied.

They’d been able to glean a wealth of important information from the trip, with their meetings with Oz surely being invaluable.

“I guess we’d be visiting the Adventurer’s City Barth next,” Ein said.

“If we were to follow Professor Oz’s documents, I believe that would be the case,” Chris replied.

“The Demon Castle is nearby, right? What kind of place is it?”

“Hm, well, it’s dilapidated. It’s home to a half-destroyed castle town, while the Demon Castle itself proudly stands in the depths. It’s been there for centuries.”

“Seems like a place that would draw many adventurers.”

“Not quite. The surrounding area is off-limits, and general entry is forbidden. It’s not exactly a place people can get close to.”

This was mainly due to the danger presented by the area.

“To be frank,” Chris continued, “even we’re not quite aware of just how dangerous the entire area is. An investigation team has been dispatched to the area numerous times, but there are many violent monsters lurking about.”

“So I guess things won’t be as simple as I thought.”

“Unfortunately. There’s apparently a seal near the Demon Castle, preventing anyone from even opening the gates.” Suddenly, the elf stared directly in the boy’s eyes; her abrupt change in demeanor caused his heart to flutter. “That seal has been there for many, many years. However, I believe the monster that was capable of creating such a thing is within you, Sir Ein.”

“Ah, do you mean the Elder Lich?”

“Precisely. A seal that could last for centuries... I feel that she’s possibly the only one who could accomplish such a feat.”

“Now that you mention it... Maybe I’ll ask her in my head.”

“Please don’t. Even if you mean it as a joke, please don’t ask her. It’ll be dangerous if something happens.”

“I know.”

Chris smiled while Ein cleared his throat.

“If I were to note anything else, it’s that I felt as if I was being watched by someone when I was near the Demon Castle. Sir Lloyd had felt something similar as well, but we only felt a presence and nothing

more. We were never under attack. However, we did always remain alert, as the presence was undoubtedly powerful,” Chris explained, before she noticed Ein’s empty glass. “Ah, shall I bring you another drink?”

“Thank you. Then if you will, please,” Ein replied.

The elf stood up and rearranged her legs, revealing her slender thighs through the slit in her dress. She elegantly walked over to the bar and grabbed a new pair of drinks before she sat back down. As she got comfortable, an unfamiliar, floral fragrance permeated the air.

“This scent...” Ein observed.

“I thought that maybe every now and then...I could wear some perfume. Is the scent too strong?” Chris asked.

She looked a little sad—it was evident that she wasn’t used to this attire or wearing perfume. Even at parties, her knight uniform was enough for the occasion. Yet, she wore her dress so well that any socialite noblewoman would be jealous.

“I think it suits you very well. You look great. In fact, I don’t mind if you wear even more perfume... I quite like the scent. I’d want to smell it even more,” Ein said, complimenting his marshal.

“S-Smell it even more? That’s a bit embarrassing to hear... Ugh...”

Had Ein gone too far and said a bit too much? Perhaps so, but his words weren’t a lie. He wanted to make sure that Chris wouldn’t regret this unusual display of her feminine side. Ein scratched his cheek sheepishly, but this was a small price to pay to keep Chris in good spirits.

“A-Are you sure I’m fine?” Chris asked worriedly. “You’re not flattering me or giving me some sort of special treatment?”

Chris closed the gap between them even more, and at this point, Ein’s head was growing numb. The marshal’s sweet fragrance was right next to him, but if the boy pulled away even a little bit, he would inevitably hurt her feelings. Though embarrassed, Chris desperately looked up at him for affirmation—her adorable attitude stood in stark contrast to her beautiful appearance. As she grabbed onto his sleeve, it wasn’t that she was a calculating woman; she was just being her naturally klutzy self, dying to hear the prince’s actual thoughts.

“You’re fine!” Ein insisted. “I find your perfume relaxing!”

“Are you sure?! I’ll trust you on this!” Chris exclaimed.

“You can! I feel a little offended that you don’t trust me right off the bat.”

Chris released Ein’s sleeve from her grip. “This scent is actually from my hometown.”

“The elves’ village?”

“Correct. Are you interested?”

“Of course. I’d love to visit, but I heard that it’s closed off to outsiders.”

It was fine with Ein if he didn’t have a grand reception, but he hesitated to visit a place that wasn’t too crazy about visitors. He had a feeling that setting foot in the village wouldn’t be a simple task.

“I believe that both you and Lady Olivia would be able to visit without any issues,” Chris said. “After all, each of you has Dryad blood running through your veins.”

Ein looked perplexed while Chris was smiling from ear to ear.

“As Majorica has mentioned in the past, Dryads are descendants of the World Tree. Given that Elves devoutly follow the World Tree, we tend to have a pretty positive impression of Dryads.”

“I-I see. Then maybe I can visit the village one day,” Ein said. “Could you be my guide when that day comes?”

“Of course! Please leave that to me!” The elf’s eyes sparkled as her smile beamed across the room. “Ah, p-pardon me! We were talking about the Demon Castle, were we not?”

“You don’t need to worry about that. We’ve got plenty of time on our hands. Let’s talk as much as we like.”

As the pair chatted into the night, the morning sun started to rise. However, the water train didn’t appear to be starting up anytime soon. It was to be expected—the bridge crossing the river had been destroyed. Even with the magical tools they had on hand, the train’s crew required assistance from a nearby town for supplies and the necessary tools.

“I’m not sure if I’m ready to approach the Demon Castle, but I am interested in Barth. Aren’t the remains of a huge monster slain by the first king around there?” Ein said.

Chris giggled. “I suppose that’s what you’d be most excited about.” She once again stared at the boy. “We’ve been through quite a bit, especially the recent ruckus at the tower... But I think you’re slowly but surely on your way to becoming a man of the first king’s caliber.”

“Huh? Really?”

“Indeed. You’ve grown to become quite splendid and noble...and extremely cool.”

Chris’s sapphire eyes pierced through the boy as her heartfelt words echoed in his heart. As the rising sun on the horizon illuminated her face, she appeared divine. One could clearly see every strand of her long eyelashes.

“When you’re so frank with me, it makes me embarrassed. Please don’t...” Ein said.

Their roles were usually reversed. The crown prince pouted and turned away, but he was actually trying to hide his blushing cheeks.

Chris noticed this, but didn't say a word. She happily watched the sun rise, humming a tune as she crossed her legs.

"Sir Ein, Sir Ein," Chris called.

It was rude for the boy to continue looking away. He mustered all his strength to calm his beating heart before he turned and discovered his smiling marshal brilliantly dazzling like the sun.



“Let’s go on a journey together again sometime,” she said.

That was an offer that Ein would have never received on the way to Ist. The boy quickly nodded and gave a curt reply.

“Let’s,” he agreed.

And with that, the pair clinked their glasses once more.

Afterword

I'm Ryou Yuuki, the author. Thank you for purchasing the third volume of *Magic Stone Gourmet*. Were you able to enjoy this volume?

In the fourth volume, Ein will visit the Adventurer's Town Barth and the Demon Lord's former domain. Popular characters from the web-novel version will make an appearance, and the owners of the magic stones living within Ein's body will also be involved. I think it'll be a huge turning point for our crown prince.

I'd be happy if you could continue to watch over this series.

A manga version has just been serialized as well. It's drawn by Kenji Sugawara and is available on *Dra Dra Sharp*#! I've even been able to enjoy the series as a reader! Seeing Ein move with such energy and charm moved me to tears! If you still haven't read the manga, I implore you to do so!

Lastly, I'd like to give my thanks to the readers, and to Chisato Naruse, who continued to draw the characters so well for this third volume. Because of everyone here, I was able to publish this third volume. Please continue to read *Magic Stone Gourmet*.

Within the king's vessel, the **White King**.

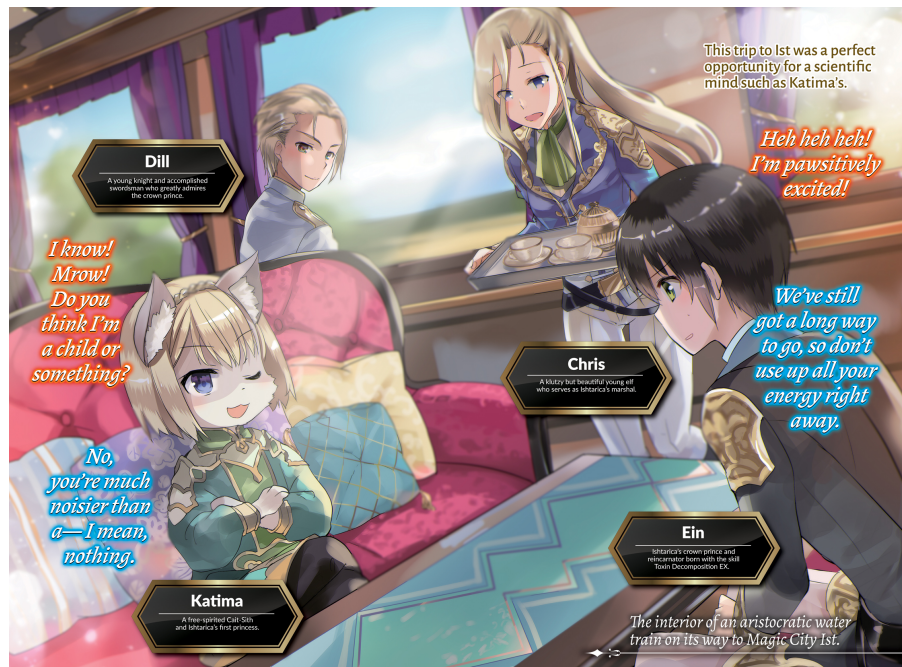
A jet-black handguard appeared on Ein's right hand before it proceeded to envelop the rest of his arm.

Raaaaah!

The level of fury and murderous intent emanating from the boy prompted the entire room to shudder.

EATING
MAGICAL POWER
MADE ME THE
STRONGEST!

**MAGIC
STONE**
Gourmet
3



This trip to Ist was a perfect opportunity for a scientific mind such as Katima's.

*Heh heh heh!
I'm pawsitively
excited!*

Dill

A young knight and accomplished swordsman who greatly admires the crown prince.

*I know!
Mrow!
Do you
think I'm
a child or
something?*

*No,
you're much
noisier than
a—I mean,
nothing.*

Katima

A first officer Cat girl and Katima's first princess.

Chris

A klutzy but beautiful young elf who serves as Katima's maid.

*We've still
got a long way
to go, so don't
use up all your
energy right
away.*

Ein

Katima's crown prince and reincarnator born with the skill *Truth Decomposition IX*.

*The interior of an aristocratic water
train on its way to Magic City Ist.*

*I want to see you soon.
It seems like I get lonely
much more easily than
I thought...*

It was a shorter message than the others he'd received, but that handful of words left an indelible impact on him.

*I-I have to
hurry up and reply!*



Krone

Ein's fiancée and the
granddaughter of Heim's
former Grand Duke.

RYOU YUUKI

ART CHISATO NARUSE

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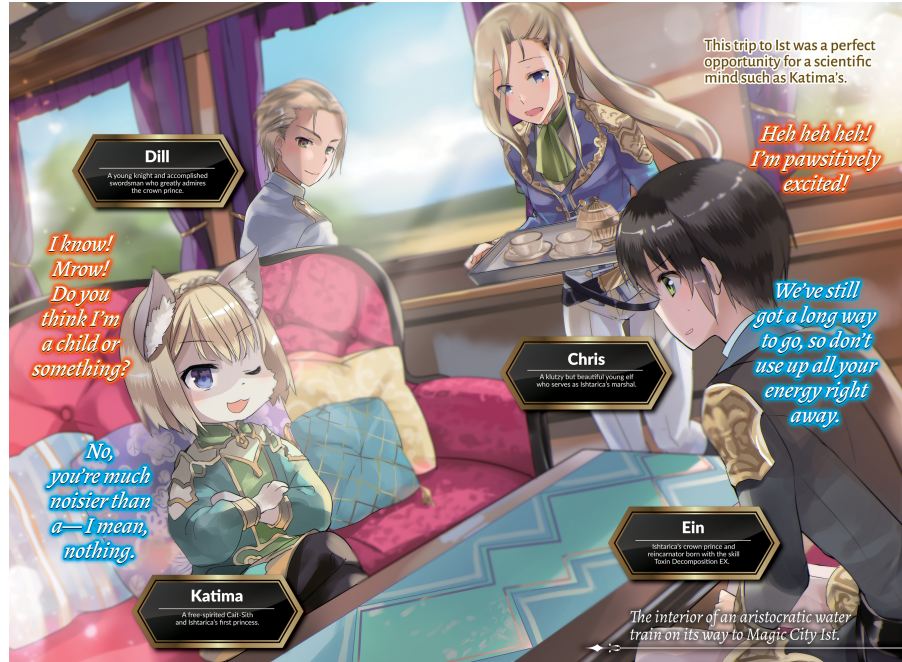
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Magic Stone Gourmet: Eating Magical Power Made Me the
Strongest Volume 3
by Ryou Yuuki
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Edited by Coop Bicknell

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